

Cross Examination

Call to Worship: Psalm 2

1st Scripture: Matthew 16:13-28

2nd Scripture: Luke 9:18-27

Introduction

There is no text in all of Scripture that I have preached from, as much as I have preached from the text that is in front of us. I'll never forget how this particular text powerfully struck me, when I took the time to meditate on it. It is so, so, relevant for the churches that make up the American church as a whole. To this end, as I continue to wrestle with various means of addressing our present, divinely-ordained predicament, I think that I would be remiss not to call us, myself included, to use some of our "quarantine time" for the purpose of self-examination. Yes, we hope and pray that our materialistic, idolatrous country would be brought to repentance, but is there no work to be done in the church, as well? Is God speaking only to the lost in our nation, as a whole, or to the churches of our nation as well, who have perhaps, fallen short of faithfully representing the glory of Christ, to the surrounding world. Indeed, judgment must begin with the house of God.

I. The Context

Our text brings us to a watershed moment in our Lord's ministry. He is way up north with His disciples, preparing to make His way south to Jerusalem for the last time. His ministry is coming to a close, and the most difficult part of His redemptive work is now merging into the foreground. He is going to the cross. The agony of anticipation is starting to trouble Him, and so He sets His face, like a flint, to go to Jerusalem. But, His disciples are absolutely clueless as to what is soon to take place. They have no idea that their beloved teacher is going to die; and that, in a most horrific and terrifying way.

Here, at Caesarea Philippi, our Lord must now prepare them for what lies just up ahead. And the setting, here in Caesarea Philippi, is not coincidental, but intentional, and somewhat difficult for us to appreciate, because we cannot see all that had surrounded the Lord and His

disciples, when He took them aside and addressed this important matter. You see, Caesarea Philippi was a well-travelled city, with a main road going through it. And all along that main road, you would have found multiples of temples and idols dedicated to false gods. It was the “red-light district” for all kinds of spiritual adultery.

And so, in the presence of innumerable idols and pagan temples, as our Lord was praying to God (in preparation for what He was about to teach His disciples concerning His imminent death), He then pulls His disciples aside and asks them this question, “Who do the crowds say that I am?” “How am I identified, commonly, among the multitudes?” And the disciples, well aware of the gist of what people have been saying, respond, “Some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say that you are one of the prophets who has risen from the dead.”

Now, while those are all noble answers (who wouldn’t think highly of John the Baptist, Elijah or one of the prophets of old?), none of them even remotely suit the identification of who Jesus really is. People can think all kinds of positive things about Jesus; He was a great prophet, a great man of God, a good person, a miracle worker and healer... all noble answers, but thinking of Jesus as only one, or more, or even all of these descriptions, is wholly inadequate and doesn’t reach the true standard of who He is. Furthermore, to not truly grasp who Jesus is, in His fullness, by faith, is the equivalent of not knowing Him in truth, which is why Muslims and JW’s and Mormons...etc, have no saving relationship with Jesus Christ, even though they all can profess good things about Jesus.

And so, Jesus then turns the interrogative question away from everyone else, and toward His disciples. He responds, “But who do you say that I am?” And friends, stopping for just a moment, let me suggest to you, that this is the most important question in all of history, which we must come to address. Indeed, it is a matter of eternal life and eternal condemnation, to know, by way of confession, from the heart, who this Jesus truly is! And Peter, directed by the Holy Spirit, responds, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

Now, let us camp here for a few moments, because I want you to really appreciate what has happened here. Two profound realities leap right out of this glorious profession with great power, which directly address both Greeks and Jews:

1) Addressing Greeks: Remember the setting. They are on a road that is dripping with all manner of temples and idols, dedicated to numerous Greek gods. There are people lining up at these temples, offering incense and worship before these gods. And Peter here, is saying, that this Jesus; this Human being with flesh and blood, is the Son of the *living God!* By this proclamation, Peter is declaring that out of all the temples that are in their presence, representing all of the Greek gods, there is only one temple that accesses the *true and living God*. And that is the human temple of Jesus Christ, who is the Son of God. Everything else is a worthless structure, vainly built unto the worship of gods that are not even alive. Jesus is the Son of the Living God. And friend, if you don't believe that, in truth, and if you don't live like you believe that in truth, this morning, then you must understand that you are an enemy of the living God, and you presently stand in a state of condemnation, heading for eternal damnation. Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of the living God; that He is co-eternal with the Father and the Holy Spirit? If not, believe today, and seek Him today, in truth.

2) Addressing Jews: Think about this, Peter, speaking of who Jesus is, states, "You are *the Christ!*" What relevance did this have, especially to the Jewish people? From the beginning of creation, just following the fall, God had promised to send One who would crush the head of the serpent, bringing salvation to mankind. And this promise had been carried by the Jews for several thousands of years, and there was a general longing for God to send this Anointed One; this Christ, to make right what man had made wrong. And that promise would come through the lines of Seth, and Noah, and Abraham, and Issac and Jacob; and through Judah (of the 12 tribes of Israel), narrowed down, ultimately through the line of David. The Messiah; the Christ would be of David's offspring! And now, here, after thousands of years of longing, and waiting, and longing, and waiting, the promised Christ; the One who would bring eternal salvation to man, had finally come! Here He was, in the flesh, among a group of unpopular, nobody disciples (fishermen and the like). And Peter could say, "It's you! You're the One, Lord! You are that *Christ*, the Son of the Living God!"

Indeed, no more profound words could have come from the lips of flesh, than those which came out of the heart of Peter, there at Caesarea Philippi. And that is why, Matthew records Jesus informing Peter that that profession did not come from the flesh, but rather, from

God! And friends, let me ask you again, do you know Jesus as the Christ? Do you recognize Him as mankind's only hope for salvation; have you personally embraced this Christ by the profession of your mouth and heart, as *your Savior*, and the only one who can save you *from your sins*? You see, Peter's profession, in its fullness, must be yours, in truth, if you are ever to have a relationship with the living God, in truth! There is no other way! There is no other means of being saved from your sins, than through the Person and work of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ!

Moving on then, we find something absolutely dumbfounding, coming out of the mouth of our Lord. Peter just made this glorious, Holy Spirit compelled confession; Peter just blurted out that most essential confession, relevant to all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, and then our Lord states, as it were, "Shhhhhh....don't tell anyone." Notice, in verse 21 of Luke's account, we are told, "And He (Jesus) *strictly* warned and commanded them to tell this to no one!" What? "Our people have been waiting since the beginning of time for this moment; here You are, and you want us to keep silent? How can that be?"

And the Lord gives His reason in verse 22, "He strictly warned and commanded them to tell this to no one, *saying, The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day.*"

First, isn't it interesting that our Lord refers to Himself here, not as the *Son of God*, in keeping with Peter's confession, but as the "*Son of Man.*" Now, of course, He is the Son of God, but here the Lord highlights that title which would most identify with His redemptive work, which necessitated His suffering and death. The Son of God came to be the Son of Man, so that He might redeem mankind and make *us* sons of God! He took on flesh and blood; He embraced the fullness of our humanity, so that, He might redeem the fullness of our humanity. He must "suffer many things." He must be "rejected by the elders and chief priests." He must "be killed" as man's representative Head. And He must be raised unto the justification of man.

But, why then keep this a secret even? Well, the disciples would have understood why, because, like everyone else, they could not have fathomed for even a moment, that the Messiah was to come and *die first*, before being raised as the true King of Israel (and not only Israel, but the whole world). This was a reality that no one could grasp at the moment. Indeed, even

though our Lord reminds His disciples of this, following this, on at least a few more occasions, they could not grasp it. And so, before the proclamation of His Messianic calling could be declared, He needed to deal with one particular, very significant problem...the whole matter of sin, which was a far more powerful slave driver than the Romans (or any other nation, for that matter). And until He dealt with the sins of His people, He would not be given the dominion with His people. And so, they were to tell no one, until He was raised from the dead. Then, salvation could be preached in His Name, to all nations. But, for now, they were to keep silent. Yes, they were to know in advance, further preparing them for their Apostolic ministry following the resurrection, but to the general population, “mum” was the word.

Now, this is so important here, because what we find is that there was a great, national misunderstanding concerning the nature of the office and work, to which the Messiah was called. An enthroned Messiah to reign over and govern all nations... yeah, that was acceptable, but to link Him with the suffering Servant passages of the OT, identifying the One dying and the One reigning as the same “Anointed” of God... that was just not understood. So misunderstood was this reality that in Matthew’s account, Peter (remember, the same Peter who had just made that glorious and bold, Holy Spirit motivated confession) began to rebuke the Lord, saying that He would not die. Indeed, this even led the Lord to respond to Peter with the words, “Get behind me Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.” Isn’t it amazing how even the blessed children of God can, at one moment, say something directed by the Holy Spirit, and then, in but a few short moments later, operate in the flesh and under the influence of Satan! Scary, but true. And don’t think we haven’t been there, brethren. But, needless to say, even Peter couldn’t get it, here.

However, it doesn’t end here, does it? You see, our Lord moves on to correct another misunderstanding which the disciples (and the Jews, in general) had, concerning not only the role of the Messiah, but also the role of *every one of His true disciples, who would claim to follow Him*. And brethren, it is the opening up of this next statement, which brings us to the very heart of what I want to address this morning, in the light of this present Coronavirus outbreak, which we know to be from God, and in part, for the sanctifying good of His church. After rebuking Peter, our Lord moves on to say, “Beloved disciples, understand this, because you have been

taught wrong by your people. If anyone desires to come after Me (if anyone wants to follow Me, as One of My disciples; if anyone wishes to claim Me by faith, and to inherit all of the eternal blessings that will come through Me...) then, not only must he receive such a Messiah (who would suffer and die, as I have described), but he too must deny *himself*, and take up *his* cross *daily*, and follow Me.”

Wow! Does that not hit us right between the eyes, brethren? Let’s open this statement up, now that we have our context in place.

II. Cross Examination

What exactly is our Lord saying here? Well, in a general sense, He is saying that those who desire to follow Christ, must be willing to make more than a mere statement of a profession of faith in Christ. They must be ready to set their heels in the soil that leads to Golgotha, as it were, so that they, like Christ who died on the cross, might be willing to lay down their own lives daily. In other words, Christianity involves a fervent commitment, not merely to benefit from Christ’s free offer of salvation, but also, to now walk sacrificially in this life, in such a way as to put Christ’s Kingdom first, above all else. It involves a willingness to walk in a new way, with new desires and ideals, which are in keeping with the will of God, as revealed in His Word. It means that when one truly comes to Christ, there is a radical change in all that motivates how that individual now lives. They now live in submission to Christ and His Gospel, desiring to put Him first, above all else. This is where the whole concept of being “born again,” takes us, isn’t it? One who is born again; one to whom the Spirit gives new life, cannot possibly walk in the way they once walked, placing all value on the things of this life. No, being born again brings with it a “Kingdom of God” mindset, where you *daily* live to advance the Kingdom of God, in His church, and by doing His will. This involves walking away from the primary interests and desires of this world, seeking first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. [Ill: Once a postal worker, but now a policeman...taking on a new identity; a new role with new responsibilities and goals in mind]

You see, if you are a true Christian (and this is important, because there are false Christians, who would profess faith in Christ, but whom Christ will turn away in the end)... if

you are a true Christian, you cannot possibly continue to live like the world, maintaining the same desires and goals as the world. It's not possible. In fact, there is a term which best describes that type of an alleged Christian. It's called hypocrisy. Many, many, many people followed Jesus around; multitudes chased after Him and had witnessed His miracles, but sadly, most of them did not really know Him in truth. They had a hypocritical faith that attempted to merge the eternal benefits brought by Christ, with a commitment to settle down in this world. And that just cannot be done. If you love the world, the love of God cannot possibly be in you. If you love your sin, and continue to practice sin as a pattern, with no sincere desire to put that sin to death, then no matter what you proclaim with your lips, you do not know Jesus in truth. And in the end, He will tell you, "Depart from Me, I never knew you... you who practice lawlessness; you who do not do the will of My Father!"

You see, that's what makes authentic Christianity so naturally impossible for anyone to embrace. That's why the Holy Spirit alone can bring one to this level of commitment and sacrifice, which proceeds out of a genuine faith in Christ. Because, how can one turn his back on this world, which appeals to all of our senses, only to lay hold of (and live in the light of) an inheritance that we cannot presently see, but we know to be real? God has to open the eyes of faith! It's the only way! Taking up a cross; taking up your own means of self-sacrifice, turning your back on this world daily, and following Christ, involves a radical work of the Spirit of God in the heart. But, when the Spirit does such a marvelous work, the individual who experiences this work has no regrets. For he sees with new eyes, both the reality of this short-lived, unfulfilling world, and the glory of knowing Christ now, in the present, with an eternal inheritance to follow!

Now, the question which we would naturally ask at this point is, "Is it really worth it?" Is it worth turning our backs on the natural desires of this world, to follow Christ, and that, through a path of ongoing suffering and self-denial? Knowing that this would be the way, in which, His disciples (and all of mankind) would think, hear what the Lord says next.

"For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost?" (Vs. 24-25).

Here our Lord provides two steel cords of motivation which should drive everyone to be willing to take up their cross and follow Him:

1) He shows that those who are willing to lose this life for the sake of Christ, will ultimately save their life. That is to say, that those who are willing to give up this life, which none of us can keep, will gain eternal life which cannot be lost. If the Coronavirus has taught us anything, friends, it's that naturally dreadful reminder that we are frail, vulnerable and always moving in the direction of dying. Most may survive and escape the Coronavirus, but *no one* will escape death. And if death is the reality for all of us; if we are certain to live, at most, seventy, eighty or ninety-some years, with an eternal destination of hell or heaven in the balance, who wouldn't be willing to give up what is already fading and extremely short (leading into eternal misery and torment), to gain a relationship with God in the present (providing true purpose), leading into everlasting glory and bliss?

2) Our Lord puts all of the stakes on the table and says, "Look, even if you could gain the entire world in this lifetime; even if you could obtain every material possession and all power, and the ability to do whatever you want, and to go wherever you desire, would you be willing to own that life for such a short time, only to lose your never-dying soul eternally, when you die in but a short time? And His point here is to drive us to consider the value of the soul, and life itself. And so, He asks the question, "What would you give in exchange for your soul?" What temporal material possession or position in this life would you take, if you had to sacrifice the eternal destination of your very soul, in order to take it? What is more valuable than your soul; the very *you* that makes *you* you, and wants to live forever? Is it not worth taking up the cross and following Christ, when eternity is in the balance?

III. Concluding Thoughts

1) While this text certainly ought to motivate all to examine whether or not they are truly in the faith, one might ask, what relevance this has for the church, in general, and especially at this time of crisis?

Brethren, even for the true church, we are always prone to wander and to allow our hearts to drift back into the world. The temptation for all of us, is to gradually lay down our crosses

and to get too caught up in the affairs of this life. And I'm not talking about sinful behaviors, per se. I'm talking about the reality of neglecting our walk with Christ. I'm talking about neglecting our daily time in the word and in prayer. I'm talking about neglecting to give our hearts to ministering to one another in the body, and to seeking to bring the lost into the Kingdom. I'm talking about holding on to this world with a firm grip, while attempting to secure our place in heaven at the same time. I'm talking about losing our first love; simple devotion to and fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

I want to encourage us to examine our own hearts, this morning. A trial such as the present one, provides us with that opportunity, and we all ought to look at our lives, prayerfully, and with sincerity before God, to consider the path that we have been on, over the last year even. Can we describe ourselves as bearing a cross? Can we describe ourselves as daily sacrificing for the sake of the Kingdom? Can we describe ourselves like the Apostle Paul, who didn't count this life dear to himself, so that, he could finish his race with joy, solemnly testifying to the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Where are we standing, right now, brethren? Where are you standing, right now? What priorities have governed your life and driven your movements, over the last year or more? Is it time for a prayerful redirecting, back on course, because we have found ourselves drifting a bit, too far into the cares of this life? Have you grown cold in your relationship with Christ? If so, let us repent. Let us remove all obstacles, and seek to return to Him. He will restore the years that the locusts have eaten away. God is gracious! But, let us return, if we have found ourselves drifting. Let us seek first the Kingdom of God; let us put Christ and His Kingdom first, and He will provide for our daily needs.

Amen!!!

Doxology: Jude 1:24-25