

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Who is Jesus? This was a question that was asked of candidates being approved for ordination who were before the Candidacy Committee. It was amazing to experience the difficulty some candidates had with this question. I remembered this question from my days on the Candidacy Committee as I was going through some old files from a Bible study, I did some time ago. I remembered this because in the notes from the Bible study I found some responses to questions I asked at the start of a study on this section of Mark's Gospel. I began by asking, what is a "GOOD CHRISTIAN?" What would a "good Christian life" look like or be like?

What is a good Christian? I have come to learn that the answer to this question starts with knowing whom Jesus is?

Just before our Gospel lesson today we have Peter struggling with the very same question; the only difference is that *Jesus* is asking and not some committee.

<sup>27</sup> Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' <sup>28</sup> And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' <sup>29</sup> He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' (Mark 8:27-29)

Who is Jesus...Peter would say that Jesus is the Messiah. I guess that according to our Gospel lesson today, we could say that Peter is being a "good-Christian" by protecting his Messiah from rejection, suffering, and even death. Why then, would Jesus call Peter Satan when he is attempting to protect Jesus?! Isn't Peter being a good Christian in his concern for his friend?!

In the Bible study notes I mentioned, I also found responses to the questions about being a good Christian. The notes said a good Christian and a good Christian life basically came down to attempting to do God's will by helping others in need. Sounds logical. One zealous response claimed a good Christian follows the Bible, which was for them their "instruction manual." It was explained by using an acronym...I remember this because I wrote it down. It was the B.I.B.L.E – Basic Instructional Book for Living Everyday...we are so clever with our faith at times...aren't we? Sadly, a question about being a good Christian is seen and answered in the context of what "I DO" for God and have nothing at all to do with who Jesus is. Or perhaps we like Peter have the correct words but only show that we really don't understand.

A question like who is Jesus and what is a good Christian, at times, only reveals what we don't really know and understand and they allow us to assume we have a firm grasp on faith and who Jesus Christ is.

Mark Twain saw the Bible NOT as an instructional manual for living; rather, he said that, "the Christian Bible is a drug store. Its contents remain the same; but the medical practice changes." He goes on in this writing to basically explain how we practice our understanding of faith by bending the teachings of the Bible to perpetuate our lack of understanding, or our corrupt and violent ways we call upright and just according to the Bible...(of course)...or I would say, according to our take on the Bible. In other words, as Twain points out, when it comes to the Bible and its teachings we assume the roll of doctor and we then pick and choose what we like

about the Bible, what we practice, and then how we apply the medicine of the Bible to suit ourselves and NOT the patient. He concludes by saying this about the Bible:

It (meaning the Bible) does certainly seem to suggest that if man continues in the direction of enlightenment, his religious practice may, in the end, attain some semblance of human decency.<sup>1</sup>

As we consider today who Jesus is and what a “good-Christian” is, let us then apply the instructions we are given today within this brief Gospel lesson...may we then deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Jesus and NOT our assumptions about Jesus and discipleship.

Within our Gospel lesson today we have two parts...two topics, Christology, and discipleship. The first part is Jesus explaining who he is and the second part is Jesus explaining who we are...NOT as good-Christians, rather who we are as disciples of Jesus Christ. And when we learn and fully understand whom Jesus is then we begin to understand who we are as disciples and NOT as good Christians.

At the very start we hear that Jesus MUST undergo great suffering, and be rejected, and be killed...but raise after three days. This is not a suggestion or even an option, it is necessary...that before he is raised in GLORY...Jesus *must* undergo *great* suffering, he MUST be rejected, and then he WILL be killed out of obedience to God.

Unfortunately, this obedience to death does NOT explain how or why the death of Jesus lies at the heart of God’s plan of salvation, Jesus merely says it does. St. Paul reminds us also that the cross makes a mockery of all our human concepts in his first letter to the Corinthians:<sup>2</sup>

<sup>18</sup> For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. <sup>19</sup> For it is written,

‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,  
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’

<sup>20</sup> Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? <sup>21</sup> For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. <sup>22</sup> For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup> For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. (1 Cor 1:18-25)

But even knowing this, we find that the heart of Peter is like ours, he does not want his friend to suffer and only recognizes Jesus as a Messiah. That means, Peter only sees Jesus as the promised deliverer of the Jewish nation, and as a messiah it says nothing about the cross and resurrection.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Twain, “Bible Teaching and Religious Practice” (from *Europe and Elsewhere* and *A Pen Warmed Up In Hell*)  
interglacial.com/pub/text/Twain-\_Bible\_Teaching.html

<sup>2</sup> Keck, Leander, senior editor. *NIB, The New Interpreter’s Bible, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes. General Articles on the New Testament. The Gospel of Matthew, The Gospel of Mark, Volume VIII.* Nashville: Abington Press, 1995. Commentary and reflections on Mark 8:31-33, page 625.

Who is Jesus...simply put...Jesus is the one who reveals God to us, the one who is rejected by us, who suffers for us, and the one who dies a horrible death because of us...more importantly...Jesus is the one who is raised from the dead on the third day and that through his conquering of death on that third day...we will subsequently share in his victory over “sin, death, and the Devil.”

Who is Jesus...the one who dies so we no longer have to. If the Bible really is our instructional manual and how we “really” live our life, then this devotion and action of Jesus ought to be the heart of our discipleship...he becomes our instructional manual for discipleship.

Today we hear Jesus telling us very clearly that it is *NECESSARY* for the Son of Man to undergo great suffering. He goes on to inform us that:

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup> For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. (Mark 8:34b-35)

Here is our instructions folks...but I guess we are too busy establishing ourselves as GOOD Christians so there is no way we are going to suffer, rather...we are going to be adored and loved but most of all...we will be seen and respected as Good Christians...or else. As good Christians we will NOT lose anything because we are looking to gain it all on our own merit. But this is not what Jesus is telling us about himself and who we are as his disciples.

As disciples, the cross of Jesus Christ takes us and our understanding out of the picture. This cross is laid on every Christian and is much more than just an image. This cross, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer so brilliantly reminded us, is the cost of our discipleship. Bonhoeffer contends:

(This cross) ...summons us away from our attachments of this world. It is the death of the old self in the encounter with Jesus Christ. Those who enter into discipleship enter into Jesus' death. They turn their living into dying: such has been the case from the very beginning. The cross is not the terrible end of a pious, happy life. Instead, it stands at the beginning of community with Jesus Christ. Whenever Christ calls us, his call leads us to death.<sup>3</sup>

Who is Jesus?

To see Jesus as the Messiah is only seeing a portion of Jesus. Jesus is The Son of God, He is God's Word, sent from heaven to a virgin's womb. Jesus took on our nature and our lot and was shown forth as God's Son. Jesus is born of the Holy Spirit and of the virgin Mary. Jesus Christ is our Lord, who fulfilled all of God's will and won for God a holy people; he stretched out his hands suffering in order to free from suffering those who trust God. Jesus Christ is the one who is handed over to a death he freely accepted, in order to destroy death, to break the bonds of the evil one, to crush hell underfoot, to give light to the righteous, to establish his covenant, and to show forth the resurrection that saves us all.

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<sup>3</sup> *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 4, Discipleship.* Translated from the German Edition, Edited by Martin Kuske† and Ilse Tödt. Minneapolis, Fortress Press paperback edition: 2003. Chapter Four, “Discipleship and the Cross” Page 87.

Jesus Christ is the story we tell, he is the Good News, he is the promise of forgiveness and life that we share as his disciples.

Who is Jesus?

What is a good Christian?

A good Christian knows their need of the grace given them in Jesus Christ. Jesus is God's supreme and final redefinition of God and God's goodness. In Jesus, God became apparent, openly revealing whom God really is, first to the disciples in flesh and blood and to us today in flesh and blood in this proclaimed Word and in this Holy Meal.

Today in this gathering and in this Word and Holy Meal we are taught a story – the Gospel – that tells us the Good News that God is the crucified, resurrected one. The one whom we rejected, whom we nailed to a cross, the one whom God the Father raised from the dead. The rejected one, the suffering one, who dies on a cross is the one who was raised up in triumph in order to free us all from sin and death...this is who Jesus is and this is who we are as sinful believers who live in this grace and mercy.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen*