

“Who do men say that I am?”

(Mt. 16:13-17)

Pastor David C. Dixon

Introduction: Who was it these people were confessing today in their baptism? We know His name was Jesus the Messiah, but do we really *know* this One who is the centerpiece and foundation of our faith?

- There are many today who promote a different view of Jesus: He was a good moral teacher, or a great philosopher and dreamer who preached love and good will but the establishment crushed Him; or maybe He was a social revolutionary. But the New Testament will not admit any of those deficient, inferior views of Jesus as valid. The only *coherent* explanation of Jesus is that He was who He said He was. What do you understand about that?
- Jesus is the Champion of all humanity, the **only Hero capable of rescuing us** from our deep plight – do we have that clear? He’s the Ransom-payer, Kinsman-Redeemer, Life-Giver, Passover Lamb, Conqueror of Hades, Son of God / Son of Man, King of kings / Lord of lords ... all the way to Alpha and Omega. These really big titles are not human attempts to build Him up in our eyes, but rather, divinely inspired attempts to express in human language the enormity of His salvation! We need a deeper appreciation of His awesomeness! Is Jesus “awesome” to you?
- *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman says that Globalization 1.0 “began around 1492... and the world went from size large to size medium.” Globalization 2.0 was the era that introduced us to multinational companies, which originated in the colonial era (1700’s); this era took a quantum leap after World War II, and again in the 1970’s-80’s, and “the world went from size medium to size small.” Then around 2000 came Globalization 3.0, in which “the world went from being small to tiny.”
- As the world has grown “smaller,” it has become deeply interconnected, yet globalization has just revealed more clearly how broken our lives are and how fragmented humanity is. The global community is well connected by Internet today, but more disconnected than ever in our personal relations and societies. So the well-known *NYTimes* columnist thinks globalization

started with Columbus? Only by ignoring Jesus' great commission to His disciples in approximately the year 30 A.D.: "go into *all the world* and preach the good news" (Mk. 16:15), and "make disciples of *every nation*" (Mt. 28:19).

- That's how important this question is: "Who do men say that I am?" It mattered so much that Jesus became the **greatest globalizer who ever lived**, sending His followers around the globe. Rev. 5:9 says that "with His blood He purchased men for God from every tribe and tongue, every people and nation." Long before that, the psalmist had prayed, "May the peoples praise you, O God. May ALL the peoples praise you" (Ps. 67:3).

- This prayer is even more urgent these days because we're witnessing the **implosion of Christian culture** in Western Europe, accelerating at an alarming rate. The demographics of Western Europe suggest that in 30 years or less, it will be a Muslim continent. Last year's Ramadan was the bloodiest on record. This year, on the day of the London attacks, an ISIS message called on its followers to use knives, guns, and vehicles in an "all-out war" on "infidels" during Ramadan (Mohammed promised 70 times the reward for "good deeds" done during Ramadan). The audio message instructed jihadists to "attack them in their homes, their markets, their roads and their forums."

- So is the Muslim world the enemy, or is it the prize? From Christ's point of view and from the perspective of the Great Commission, that's a "no brainer!" Since in their native lands Islam has put up so many barriers to Muslims' having access to the Gospel, God has opened the door for them to come nearer to where the message is available – and it will certainly put Christians to the test! Do we really believe what we claim to believe in the Gospel? Will we practice it with Muslim neighbors? In our Scripture passage for today, Jesus also put His disciples to the test.

1) The location of this "test" was in the direction of Caesarea Philippi, about 40 km north of the Sea of Galilee (today's Golan Heights), where Jesus took His disciples one day, likely seeking a retreat from the ever-pressing crowds, and even more so, from the constant nagging controversies with the Pharisees. Jesus had just warned His disciples about the Pharisees' "yeast," because their teaching had such a corrupting influence.

- Caesarea Philippi was a pagan city built up at the foot of Mt. Hermon by the tetrarch of that region, Herod Philip (son of Herod "the Great"). He built the city there in honor of the emperor and himself in an area that had long been devoted to the worship of Greek gods. There was a huge cave at the base of the rock mountain with a river gushing forth from it, headwaters of the Jordan River; it was believed to be the gates to the underworld (known as the "Gates of Hades," which Jesus insisted would never prevail against His church).

- This was the setting where Jesus gave His disciples a kind of test, asking them what they knew about people's opinions regarding Himself: "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" One modern critic suggested this was the question "of a man who wished to disturb but who was *also himself disturbed* ... who had somehow found himself in deeper waters than anticipated" (Cullen Murphy). Representative of liberal scholarship in general, this viewpoint sees Jesus as insecure, needing reinforcement from His disciples, instead of recognizing Him as the Teacher He was, using every circumstance to shape and mold His disciples' hearts and minds with the new perspective.

- Obviously Jesus was not primarily concerned about His **popularity ratings** among the people: He knew perfectly well that others referred to Him as a false prophet, madman, or collaborator

of Beelzebul. So He pressed home the bigger question in the second round of the test: “What about you?” That was what really mattered: what had *the disciples* come to believe about Jesus after roughly two years of observing Him up close and hearing His teaching?

2) Peter expressed the conviction of the group when He called Jesus “the Anointed One, Son of the living God.” They believed He was truly the One God had sent for the redemption of Israel, and even if they didn’t fully understand Him many times, they had seen enough to know that nobody else on earth could compare with Him. That was not yet a full-fledged confession of His divinity, but it was a good place to start. No one else could compare – He was “awesome!”

- Of course, today we use that word to describe someone’s new shoes, or the ice cream we’re enjoying, or the latest movie we saw, or our new Iphone. We’ve so overused the word that it has lost its original meaning. In the Bible it’s almost always used to describe a reaction of astonishment at God’s works or at Jesus’ demonstrations of authority and power, which involved wonder, veneration, reverence, and even a mixture of holy fear. **What can we do to recover a sense of the awesomeness of our Lord?!**

- Another modern critic (Kermit Zarley) notes in response to Jesus’ question, “No one said He was God!” Of course, they didn’t! That would have been a total *anachronism* at this point (out of place chronologically). No one in Jewish society would’ve dared to call a man God – until after the resurrection! But the disciples’ experience with Jesus was already challenging all their preconceived notions.

- Notice the testimony in the Gospel accounts: in **Matthew**, Jesus claimed to be the Judge to whom all would come on the final day; **Mark** shows Him demonstrating absolute power over the elements of nature, every disease known to man, and unclean spirits; **Luke** recounts how He was conceived of the Holy Spirit and how He called the dead back to life; in **John**, Jesus calls Himself living water, the bread of life, the Way, the Truth, the Life, “I AM”, and says “the Father and I are one.” And you don’t think Jesus was **claiming to be God in the flesh?!** It would require the resurrection to finally break down their strong taboo against identifying any human with God.

- Before the resurrection, no Jew dared to imagine that God Himself would ever come in lowly flesh like ours! Both David and Isaiah (in the Old Testament) had dreamed of God rending the heavens and coming down (Ps. 144:5-6, Is. 64:1-2), but they had imagined it in terms of a huge power display: that’s how they wanted to see God pull back the curtains (with quaking mountains, trembling nations, crushed enemies). They never imagined **God submitting to all the things that we mortals have to put up with**: like being reduced to a fetus in a mother’s womb, passing through the birth canal, having His “swaddling clothes” changed, experiencing hunger and thirst, sibling rivalry and puberty, earning His bread “by the sweat of His brow,” sorrow and tears, religious and political persecution, unfairness and injustice, public insults, shaming, cruelty, torture, lynching, murder. That was beyond anything they could ever imagine.

- Yet at no point in all that humiliation did Jesus have to think twice about *whether* He would forgive. Luke’s Gospel indicates that precisely as He was being crucified, God’s Son began repeating what was also in the Father’s heart: “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they’re doing” (Lk.23:34). That was *God* going through all that misery on our behalf, assuming the consequences of *our* failures! *THAT’s* truly *awesome!*

3) Compare Him to another earthly hero: Sgt. 1st Class Alwyn Cashe. According to a US army publication (*Stars and Stripes*, www.stripes.com), Sgt. Cashe became “the ultimate hero” in Iraq when a roadside bomb detonated and ripped through the fuel tank of his Bradley Fighting Vehicle, igniting it like napalm.

- The seven men seated inside were knocked unconscious and had no chance to escape the fire. But the gunner, Sgt. 1st Class Alwyn Cashe, managed to crawl out of the burning wreckage, wounded and drenched in diesel fuel. He then pulled the driver from his seat before the flames reached there, dragging him to safety. Then he went back. This 16-year Army veteran had seen a dozen of his men die on that tour in Iraq, and he couldn't bear to lose another. As he desperately tried to open the vehicle's hatch, his uniform caught fire. By the time he got in, all he had on was his body armor and helmet; the rest of his uniform was in ashes or seared to his skin.

- With help, he carried one of his dying men out of the fire and back to medics who tried to triage their charred colleagues. Then Cashe went back again. Rounds of ammunition were pinging off the vehicle, but they couldn't tell whether they were from insurgents' weapons or from the soldiers' own ammunition ablaze inside. As he reached the next soldier, Cashe tried to douse the fire on his uniform, only to realize that it was his own skin on fire and peeling off from the heat. Another soldier helped him move the next wounded friend to safety.

- And then he went back again. Cashe was the last of the injured to be evacuated from the scene. Doctors later said he suffered second and third degree burns over 90% of his body, but he still walked off the battlefield under his own power. Sgt. 1st Class Alwyn Cashe, and five of the men he saved from the blazes, succumbed to their burns and wounds weeks later in Brooke Army Medical Center, San Antonio, Texas. But Cashe was able to tell his family how glad he was that at least his men had been able to say goodbye to their families. He was called an awesome hero.

Conclusion: If it had been one of your loved ones that Cashe had rescued, **you would pore over that story, appreciating every detail**, wouldn't you? You'd reread it many times, unable to fathom what motivated him to care so much about others instead of looking out for his own safety. You'd probably be moved to tears ...

- So why wouldn't we see what Jesus did in the same light?! Why wouldn't we see Him as the greatest Hero ever?! May God help us to go deeper in appreciating the **awesomeness of the rescue Jesus carried out on our behalf!** May we be motivated to pore over the Gospel accounts with more attention to every detail of His loving care, asking Him to remove the blinders from our eyes, asking Him to help us *live by that love!*

- May we too confess Him as the Anointed One, God Incarnate, our Redeemer, Shepherd, Counselor, Friend, and Awesome God! May you seek Him, call on Him, and pursue Him as if your life depended on it – because it does!