

The Christ of God

Luke 9:18-20

December 23, 2018

We are back in our study of Luke's Gospel, so you can turn in your bibles to the next verse, Luke 9:18 and if you are visiting with us for today we are so glad as we've said, so glad that you've come we want to welcome you and greet you in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior there is probably no better way to sum up Grace Church and what we stand for, what we believe in, than to say that we love God and his holy word. We love him dearly, deeply. We study his word every Sunday and throughout the week, as well, in a number of different venues and a number of different ways, so that we can know our God, so we can worship him in spirit and in truth.

We've been engaged in a, a pretty in-depth study of Luke's Gospel, and by God's providence, we find ourselves on this Christmas Sunday in a text, it's maybe not a text you might call

a, a typical Christmas passage, but it, maybe it should be. This text is what we might call a definitional text. It is one that highlights the very basic, very essential need for identification. Rightly identifying something is basic to living life. Rightly identifying something, that's a skill that we use every single day. We identify colors, words, signage, meaning every single day. In fact, you took that for granted as you drove here this morning. Imagine if you were not able to discern the difference in meaning between a red light and a green light. That might've resulted in an accident on your way in. Some people are outright color-blind. They're unable to tell the difference between the color red and the color green at all.

I was in the military, and a number of you served in the military, and the military excludes people like that, who can't identify something as basic as color because it could mean the difference between life and death, cutting the wrong wire. And everybody goes, Boom! The military has always been pretty big on identifying things like that very well. Like identifying friend versus enemy. They need to make sure they're shooting at the right people and that they're not shooting at their friends. Make sure that when a friend comes into sight picture, they pull

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off the trigger and hold their fire. I remember hearing of something when I was in the military called an IFF system. That's an acronym that stands for Identification Friend or Foe. That is a way electronically to identify a friend and allow a friend safe passage. Anybody who doesn't give the right protocol, the right bona fides, is shot. So it's very important to the military.

You may have heard the recent news that this basic issue of identity, making a proper identification is the basic and essential concern that's led to a parting of ways between Jim Mattis, the Secretary of Defense, and President Donald Trump. In his resignation letter, Mr. Mattis wrote about, quote, "maintaining strong alliances and showing respect to allies." And then conversely, staying resolute, quote, "Resolute and unambiguous in our approach to those countries whose strategic interests are increasingly in tension with ours." End quote. That's a long way of saying, our enemies. At the heart of his concern is the basic need of our nation's military to act in accordance with basic definitions, basic identification, friend or foe.

I'm afraid that that basic skill of identification is something we teach to our children to keep them safe while they're growing up. It's what ensures that our children will have categories in their minds to make sense of the world. I'm concerned that our essential ability to identify things is short supply today as our world descends into a deeper and deeper state of confusion. You may have heard of identity politics, which is ostensibly about making political decisions based on whatever group or tribe or category one identifies with. While people have tried in vain to make that invalid argument work, it won't. And while they've argued in vain, hitting an absolute brick wall in trying to persuade any political opponent or social opponent, at the same time radical academics, radical elites, have been messing around with those basic structures of identity and definition. Radicals have been changing how we identify virtually everything. It's not just the difference between friend or foe at stake, here. Now people don't know something as basic as how to identify and define marriage. Redefining marriage has led for many in our country to fail to identify something as basic and fundamental as gender. They ignore basic biology; they ignore what's obvious to our senses, obvious to our social interaction, and claim that we can't rely on any of that anymore, not our biology, not our senses, not

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normal engagement with humanity. We can't rely on that anymore to know the difference between male and female.

So clearly, as we enter into this Christmas season, America finds itself in a tough spot. The youngest, brightest minds in this country, the very future of this country, they are being re-educated in irrational nonsense. They're being trained to tear the country apart with their own hands. The picture, looking at all that, is pretty bleak. That moral decay is not going to stay on the inside; it's not going to stay private. It moves to the outside, becoming very, very public and consuming us all. The end of the road that we're on is still greater confusion, more futility, corruption, degradation, we're seeing that everywhere. So, Ho, ho, ho! Merry Christmas, everyone!

I said that tongue-in-cheek, Merry Christmas, but honestly, if I can give you some hope this morning, it truly is in the message of Christmas. And it's back to a basic definition. It is back to a matter of basic identity. When you talk with people, don't enter the fray of discussion or argument by arguing about identity politics, the definition of marriage, the difference

between male and female. That is chasing around the mulberry bush. As Proverbs 26:4 says, "Answer not a fool according to his folly lest you be like him yourself." So listen, don't get into this irrational discussion. You'll end up falling into the same quagmire as those you're trying to pull out of it. Ignoring and denying those basic definitional structures that makes us human that is not rational.

Instead, go back to the most basic and essential issue of definition and identification. Get to that as you talk this Christmas around the table, in the living room, wherever you happen to be. Take the same approach, in fact, that Jesus took with his disciples, addressing the most important question in the world to them: "Who do you say that I am?" Get the answer to that question correct, and every other question will fall in line after it. Issues of authority, biblical inerrancy and sufficiency, the definition of marriage, predicated on the fact that God "made them male and female," the exclusivity of salvation in Jesus Christ by grace alone through faith alone in him alone, all of those issues and every other issue solved at the most basic level of identification: "Who is this Jesus?"

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Take a look at your Bible, and our text for this morning is going to be Luke 9:18-20. But I'm going to start reading in verse 18, and I'm going to continue past that section. Follow along as I read.

Luke 9:18 says, "Now it happened that as he was praying alone, the disciples were with him. And he asked them, 'Who do the crowds say that I am?' And they answered, 'John the Baptist. But others say, Elijah, and others, that one of the prophets of old has risen.' Then he said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' And Peter answered, 'The Christ of God.' And he strictly charged 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 on the third day be raised.' And he said to all, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.'" We'll stop there.

We're not going to cover all those verses this morning, as I said, but I want you to notice how rightly identifying who Jesus is, that sets a dividing line for all humanity. And the division is this division: It's between those who embrace Jesus as the Christ of God and those who reject Jesus as the Christ of God. Those who embrace him, they will endure suffering with him. Suffering, though, is not the end of the story, as Jesus says, it's only the beginning, because those who suffer with him will, like him, also be glorified with him. Get the essential question of Jesus right. Rightly identify who Jesus is, this is the very basic fundamental message of Christmas; you're gonna find that everything else is going to fall right into line.

That's why Jesus starts here with his own disciples. He has a lot to tell them, a lot to teach them, much to convey. But he needs to make sure, drawing out of them, eliciting from them the most basic question of Christianity: Who is this Jesus? And as he asks that question, he draws forth from them, through the mouth of Peter, the good confession. So he asks the most fundamental question of all: "Who do you say that I am?" That's the question that's posed for each of us today as we think about



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Christmas ahead of us. Who do we say that Jesus is? Who do I personally, who do you personally, say that Jesus is?

If you'd like to jot down a little outline in your notes, it'll help you maybe follow along. We're going to cover this text, Luke 9:18-20, we're going to cover that in just three simple points: the setting, the question, and the answer. The setting, the question, and the answer, and I'll fill that in a little bit. Pretty simple. But let's first start with the setting.

What's the setting? Point one: Jesus prays for divine illumination. That's the setting. Jesus prays for divine illumination. Verse 18 again, he begins setting the scene. He says, "Now it happened," and there's the point, "as he was praying alone the disciples were with him. He asked them, "'Who do the crowds say that I am?'"

Now, hidden from our sight between verse 17, where Jesus just finished feeding the multitudes, and then those opening words of verse 18. Between those two verses are several months

of travel and activity. Luke doesn't hint that; he just hides it. It could be as many as six months of time that has passed there a lot of significant ministry that's happened. All that has disappeared in the gap that exists between verse 17 and verse 18. You can read for yourself if you want to jot it down and read it later, Mark 6:45-8:26. Mark 6:45-8:26, jot that down in your notes and you'll have the whole story of everything that happened. Nothing is hidden from you.

But just to summarize, let me tell you briefly. After miraculously feeding the 5,000, Jesus went from there and he walked on water on the Sea of Galilee, met the disciples in the boat. They came to the other side. He got there; he healed the multitudes of sick people. He then dealt with a confrontation from the Pharisees. After that he cast out a demon from the daughter of a Syro-Phoenician woman up in Tyre and Sidon. He restored hearing to a deaf man. He miraculously fed another 4,000 people. He dealt with yet another confrontation from the Pharisees, and then he gave sight to a blind man. All of that happened, all that ministry activity happened while Jesus and his disciples were on the road, while they were traveling. It starts at the location of the feeding of the 5,000 near

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Bethsaida, verse 17. But before we get into verse 18, Jesus is actually journeying, with his disciples, from Bethsaida to Gennessar on the west side of the Sea of Galilee. Then he went north to the region of Tyre and Sidon. Then he made this big eastward loop over to the, the region of the Decapolis east of the Galilee, east of the Jordan River. Then he went from there, sailed across to the west side of Galilee, Dalmanutha, and then back to Bethsaida. And it's from Bethsaida, where they started walking north to Caesarea Philippi. That's a lot that's hidden from us, right? That's where we catch up with Jesus and his twelve disciples, verse 18. They're on the road to Caesarea Philippi when they're having this conversation. Caesarea Philippi is a city situated on the southwestern base of the snow, snow-capped mountain, Mount Hermon. It was Philip the Tetrarch, a descendant Herod the Great, a big mess of a family tree that Herod left. But Philip the Tetrarch, he expanded and beautified the city. He named it Caesarea in honor of Caesar Augustus, and he attached his own name to it to honor himself, of course. And then to distinguish from the seaport of Caesarea, located on the Mediterranean coast, it was called Caesarea Philippi.

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It was a thoroughly pagan city, with a, with a thoroughly pagan history. Very nearby was a sanctuary dedicated to the worship of the God Pan. So pantheism is associated with that region. Interesting that Jesus took his disciples there to help them to clarify the identify of himself. Against the backdrop of a dark, pagin, pagan culture, and in the shadow of this towering 9,000 foot plus Mount Hermon. The landscape is both picturesque and symbolic. There, there's a quiet serenity accompanied with a majestic power of the mountains. Perfect setting to elicit from his disciples the good confession. But again, you wouldn't know it from what Luke has written here. He's told us nothing about that setting, nothing about that location, nothing about that geography, the topography, nothing about the pagan background, the religious setting. He said nothing about the several months of intervening travel, nothing about all that Jesus did, where he went during a full, pretty full itinerary there. There's none of that here.

We have to ask the question, why? Why has Luke passed over all of that? Why did he ignore the geography, topography, religious setting, the several months of travel and ministry? Because Luke wants to keep us focused. He's driving us to a

verdict. He wants us to see along with his disciples, he wants us to see very clearly the difference between popular opinion about who Jesus is and then a believing conviction about who Jesus is. That's his purpose in writing, actually, Luke 1:4, to give his readers "certainty about Jesus Christ." So Luke moves us along. He doesn't want us to linger. He doesn't want us to get lost in the myriad of details. There's so much about Jesus' life that could have been written, John tells us, "If all that was written about what Jesus said and did, all the books of the world," could not fit, he could, "would not contain the whole of it." So Luke, he has a purpose, and he's sticking, holding fast to his purpose. He moves us along from Herod's perplexity in verses 7-9, asking, "Who is this Jesus?" And then he moves directly into Jesus feeding the multitudes, verses 10-17, showing Jesus to be the exclusive, all-sufficient provision, power, and salvation in God. And now, moving directly from there, Luke wants us to ask and answer the question: "Who is this Jesus?"

Notice, Luke sets the question that Jesus poses, here, not in the beautiful mountain surroundings of Mount Hermon, not, not in the pagan socio-religious context of Pan worship, not in the

socio-political territory of Caesarea Phillipi. Luke sets the question of Jesus' identity in the context of prayer, in the context of Jesus praying. When he asked his disciples, "Who do the crowds say that I am?"

Jesus had just been praying. He has emerged here from a time of private prayer; says, "The disciples were with him." That verb can mean, accompanying him, like as in on the journey up to Caesarea Phillipi very accurate. But Jesus is here pictured, portrayed as praying alone. Luke wants us to see this conversation that is coming up is not in any way spontaneous; it's not whimsical. Jesus here is not indulging in some kind of moment of messianic introspection, like navel gazing, like, Who am I, really? You know? Do you know? He's not doing that. This conversation is planned. The conversation is intentional, and we need to see in this connection of private prayer of Jesus to his Father. It's not just Jesus who's planning to reveal identity to the disciples. The questioning of the disciples is directed here by the will of God the Father. God is the unseen actor here in this narrative.

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Whenever we see Jesus praying in Luke's Gospel, it's like this, it's connected to something significant. It always accompanies, his prayer does, a significant revelation of God about the true identity or nature of Jesus Christ and his ministry. He's, he was praying at his baptism in Luke 3, when the heavens open and the Spirit descended in the form like a dove, rested upon him, and his Father said, "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased." Jesus is praying before that happens. He's praying before he calls the Twelve, his drawing them out of the whole company of the disciples and identifying them; naming them as his Apostles, his sent-out ones. He's praying before does that. He prays here at Peter's great confession. He prays a little bit later in the chapter; he prays before the Transfiguration when Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus, and Jesus is transfigured, his glory is shining brightly, and Peter says, Oh, this is great! Let's, let's make three booths, three tents, and let's all stick around awhile, and the Father says, no no no! This is my Son; listen to him. When they looked up, Moses, Elijah, they're gone. Jesus is standing there alone. Jesus is praying before that. He's going to be praying on the night of his betrayal on the Mount of Olives, Luke 22. He'll be praying before the Cross, during the Cross, while he's being crucified. Luke 23, he prays. And in each instance, prayer

precedes and forecasts critical elements and developments in the story of salvation. So don't come to any conclusion, any foolish conclusion that Luke has somehow missed a bunch of content here. He's not missed it.

This is masterfully subtle story-telling, and yet it's abundantly clear, Luke is helping us to see that coming to the right conclusion about who Jesus is; this a matter of divine revelation. This is a matter of divine illumination. In other words, it is God who must reveal the truth of Jesus' identity to us. It's God who enables us to see the true nature of his ministry. Apart from God's revelation, apart from the illuminating power of God's Holy Spirit, no one can come to the right answer. And you know how you know you've come to the right answer? When you live in accordance with that right answer. If Jesus is the Son of God and Son of Man, what does that mean for your life? Well, the New Testament has a lot to say about that.

I'll quickly add, it's not just the illuminating work or power of God that we depend upon to see Jesus clearly. It's also the initiative of God that we depend upon. Jesus was praying;



God was directing. And then Jesus elicited the good confession from his disciples, and yet, clear indication here of the sovereign grace of God. He does what he wills. He opens the eyes of the blind.

Well, with Luke's theological emphasis on prayer as the setting, that's a first point. Let's consider a second point: the question that Jesus asks. The question: He's actually asking two questions, which are really identical almost but the first question that he asks has a rather focused point, and with this question, which is point two in our outline, Jesus clears away popular opinion. You can jot that down in your notes. Jesus here in his question clears away popular opinion. He asks them, "'Who do the crowds say that I am?' And they answered, verse 19, 'John the Baptist. But others say, Elijah, and others, that one of the prophets of old has risen.'"

If you look back at verse 7, verses 7-9, we first hear about those three viewpoints, those three opinions, we hear them from Herod, in the context of Hero the tetrarch. Herod is perplexed about Jesus, and he asks, verse 9, "Who is this about

whom I hear such things?" Listen, it's, it's not just the crowds, the *hoi-polloi*, who are curious about Jesus. Rulers are as well. Same thing today. I, I, you can go back and probably Google this. The question has been posed to every US president: "Who is Jesus?" You know what? They all have an answer. All the US presidents, everybody in government from high to low in our country, you know what, everybody's heard of Jesus, and everybody has an answer. Travel the world; ask who is Jesus. There are relatively few who have never heard his name. They all have an answer. They all have an opinion.

For Herod Antipas, he'd recently beheaded John the Baptist. He'd had him confined in prison; he was a troublesome, meddlesome prophet who started to call Herod Antipas to account on behalf of not just a adultery, but an incestuous adultery. So Herod locked him up, and then through a turn of events ended up beheading him. And that was a problem because Herod failed to calculate the popular appeal and popularity of John the Baptist, who's a true prophet of God. John garnered deep respect among the people, and at the time that Herod had had John beheaded, all of a sudden he starts hearing the reports of this powerful, powerful explosion of teaching and miraculous healing that's

going on everywhere. You can see that identified in Luke 9:6. This explosion of authoritative teaching, it reminds Herod, it puts back on his conscience, "John, whom I beheaded," and his prophetic ministry. He's worried here about a popular uprising, really. He's, he sees the supernatural power behind John's ministry. It's got him perplexed; it's him nervous. He's got to figure out here what's going on. "Who is this Jesus?" His motivations are partly political, but also they're a matter of intense personal interest and curiosity. The memory of John the Baptist haunts him. His evil deed torments his conscience. And he's concerned about what it's going to do among the common people. Is it going to lead to an uprising?

It's telling, here, that the disciples' first, almost a knee jerk answer to Jesus' question, their first answer when he asked, 'Jesus says, 'Who do the crowds say that I am?', their, his, their first answer is John the Baptist. The other two answers represent other opinions, but the majority opinion seems to be among the contemporary crowds here, is that Jesus is actually a resurrected John the Baptist. It's not only a testimony to John's massive popularity, but also to their view, among the people, of Herod's evil in beheading John. The power

at work in Jesus' ministry was undeniable. The popular view was that Jesus was a resurrected John. It really does border on superstition, but it's, it's as if they believe that John is coming back from the dead to exact vengeance and retribution on King Herod Antipas. That's something they wouldn't mind seeing, a little bit of retribution against him. That's the first opinion, that Jesus is John. It, recog or reflects, here, the popular hope for justice, for a bit of retribution against Herod for the murder of John.

But there are two other popular options: that Jesus is Elijah, or one of the prophets of old. Why those? Why those two? Why those options? Why, why are people talking about that and assuming that about Jesus and his ministry. First, let's start with Elijah. Why him? You may remember from your reading of the Old Testament that Elijah actually never died. He never went through a normal human experience of death. Elijah was taken to heaven by God, 2 Kings 2:11. He didn't die a physical death. He was taken up into heaven kind of like Enoch of old in Genesis. But the next time the name Elijah comes up in the Old Testament is at the very end of the Old Testament. It comes from the prophet Malachi. Listen to this, Malachi 4:5-6, "Behold, I will

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send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”

The fact that Elijah never died, he was brought to heaven supernaturally, along with a future role that he would play in eschatology in the last days, from all of that some oral traditions developed that made Elijah sound a little more superstitious and greater than he was, kind of like one of today's Roman Catholic saints. People believed Elijah was up in heaven, he's overseeing the deeds of mortals. He was up there, looking down, comforting the faithful, helping the needy. That's tradition that developed about him. And those traditions, along with what was written, along with the supernatural power that accompanied his prophetic ministry, you can see why some people believed that Jesus may, in fact, be Elijah, coming "before the great and terrible day of the Lord." They're excited about that because that meant that end-time prophecies are coming into fulfillment. They're seeing an end to Roman occupation, an elevation of Israel to take prominence and power on the world stage. I, I find it fascinating, I don't know if you do, every

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time that some, you know, discolored moon comes in, you've got articles about blood moons and red heifers and sacraments and everything's happening! Everything's happening! The end of the world is happening! This stuff gets passed around all over Facebook, and people, some people bite and chew and spit out but some people really soak it in, don't they?

Same kind of thing here. People always want to live in interesting days, but then they regret living in interesting days, don't they? Many people believe that Jesus was John the Baptist come back from the dead. Some people believed Jesus was Elijah. This miraculous outpouring signified the end of days, end times, "the great and terrible day of the Lord" is about to happen, God's judgment falling on the Gentile nations. And that's all good if you're a Jew, and you're gonna see the end of the Gentile nations and you're gonna be elevated. Everybody wants to see end times events when you're on the favored side.

Others believed Jesus was, more generally speaking, the rising up of one of the ancient prophets. This view of Jesus as one of the ancient prophets, risen and active on the earth; very

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powerful, appealing opinion among the people. It's an opinion that he was one of the ancient prophets, it's an opinion that may be a bit lost on us as modern people. We're so conditioned to believe that, the new is better than the old, because the old, after all, is irrelevant. Advancements in technology have taught us to replace the old with what's new. It's just a fact of the modern world. No one remembers, no one wants to remember, more to the point, no one wants to use, cares to use, things like a first-generation iPhone. That's junk. Nobody wants to use a cathode ray tube in their television. Nobody cares to use an ice box. Nobody wants a washboard for washing the clothes. And for good reason for all those things.

I'm not a Luddite, I like technology. But we are conditioned, aren't we, to think of the old as outdated and useless. And that's why this opinion, this popular opinion, about who Jesus is, it's been lost on us. We gotta remind ourselves of the importance of ancient things. James Edwards writes, "The modern world typically regards antiquity as something that's been surpassed and is thus functionally irrelevant. In Jesus' day, antiquity was a sign of veracity and genuineness. For the true and indestructible was that which had

survived the ages. A prophet of long ago was thus a distinction of veracity, not a curse of irrelevance." End quote.

Folks, I want you to think about that every time you open your Bible, that this is a book that has stood the test of time. It rightly understands and diagnoses the human condition, and it rightly prescribes salvation for the human condition. There is redemption to be found nowhere else on this world, only in Scripture. It's stood the test of time. It's stood the misrepresentation, the beatings that the liberals have subjected it to, to try to deny its authenticity, its veracity, its truthfulness. That's not true. This Bible is more powerful than ever, and for every attack against it, it is made all the stronger. For those people who tell me as I talk to them, oh, the Bible is just a bunch of made-up stories, I'm like, which one? And then they fall silent. Oh, the Bible has all kinds of mistakes in it. Oh, really? Show me one. They fall silent. For those who dare to find a contradiction and present me with something like that, as soon as I show them how that contradiction, that *seeming* contradiction is resolved in harmonizing Scripture with Scripture, they don't want to talk anymore. Listen, the people who deny the veracity of the



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Scripture are nothing more than bullies. Stand up to them just once, and silence their slander against holy Scripture.

The opinions about Jesus' identity hovered, as you can see, John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the ancient prophets, it Really hovers around three stages of Israel's history. Jesus is one of the latter prophets, contemporaneous with John the Baptist, that was one opinion because they said, He is John the Baptist. That's a contemporaneous opinion. Or they said, he's from the period of the former prophets, Elijah, who's returned to kick off fulfillment of end times prophecy. That's who Jesus is. Or the other opinion is that he's really, he surpasses all that. He's not contemporaneous with us. He's not, he's not from the former prophets. He's one of the ancient prophets. He goes way back. He's like Moses, perhaps even Enoch, risen, emerging from way back when.

What's the thread that ties all three of these opinions together? What do they have all in common? One obvious thing is that they all involve identifying Jesus as a prophet. You hear the same thing today, don't you? Oh, he was a great prophet.

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They can see the special power, the prophetic character, the divine commissioning of Jesus Christ. Clearly and obviously to everyone, Jesus is a true prophet of God. He speaks the words of God. He speaks with the prophetic authority. He wields the power of God himself. In fact, there's biblical support for that viewpoint. Moses actually predicted the coming of another prophet like himself, and he instructed Israel to listen carefully to that prophet. In Deuteronomy 18:15, Moses said, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers. It is to him that you shall listen." A few verses later, Moses reminded them of the very words of God when he told them this, quoting God, "'I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among your brothers. I will put my words in his mouth. He shall speak to them all that I commanded him.'"

Listen, Jesus is the fulfillment of Deuteronomy 18:15 and Deuteronomy 18:18. Jesus is the one whom Moses spoke of, the one that God promised. So, then, why is the answer that Jesus is a prophet, why is that an insufficient answer to the question, "Who is this Jesus?" Why does Jesus in verse 20, why does he press his disciples for a different answer, one that clears away

popular opinion, one that rises above popular assumption? It's because of this: Yes, Jesus is a prophet, but he is more than a prophet. To consider Jesus as just a prophet, as merely a prophet, someone on par with John the Baptist, the greatest prophet that they knew, someone on par with Elijah or with one of the ancient prophets, it's nothing against those great men. It's no slight against them.

But Jesus is no mere man. Jesus is a far, far greater person. He is one whose essence is both human and divine, as we've been singing about this morning, as we've been hearing from Scripture. Jesus possesses, by this incredible miracle, two natures. He possesses two natures, one human, one divine, without confusing the substance of either nature. Both natures are perfect in union, in perfect harmony with one another, in one Person. The incomprehensible mystery of the incarnation of the Son of God comes into reality.

So the problem with popular opinion about Jesus, whether it's among the crowds back then or among the crowds of our own day; the problem with all their opinion about Jesus is that

their estimation is way too low. They try to esteem him by calling him a prophet, but in fact, they're insulting him. They see him and esteem as nothing more than a man, a great man, maybe, an elevated man perhaps, but still nothing more than a man.

For the Muslims today, Jesus is a prophet; he's a great prophet. Yet he's inferior to the prophet Mohammed because Mohammed gave them the final revelation. Among the Eastern religions today, Jesus is an enlightened man, perhaps like the Buddha. Or he's numbered among the pantheon of Hindu gods and goddesses, elevated to that status. To the Jews today, Jesus is not the Messiah. They may not know who he is, really, but they are rather insistent that they know for certain who he is not. Jesus, say the Jews, is not the Messiah. That's been their historic position on Jesus going all the way back to the first century, to the pages of Scripture itself. And listen—that opinion is not only wrong, it's deadly because faced with an either or decision that Luke is drawing us to that verdict, and faced with that either or decision Jesus is either the Christ of God, or as the Jews thought he's an agent of the devil. Jews rejected the former. They opted for the latter, and they

crucified him as a liar and a blasphemer, as a threat. That's why you cannot remain neutral on this question.

As I mentioned earlier, that's what Luke has been driving at all along. He's been driving us toward a verdict, and we must choose between popular opinion, which is to esteem him, as high as they try to go, it's to esteem him far too lowly. We must choose between that popular opinion and a believing conviction which identifies him accurately for who he really is. If we survey Luke's Gospel, Luke has been driving us to that believing verdict based on the evidence. He has not left us with much of a choice. There's one and only one correct view of who Jesus really is. Already in Luke's Gospel, if you'd like to scroll through with me, you can do that, going back to Luke 4. Already in his Gospel, Luke 4:18-19, Jesus was there preaching in his home town of Nazareth, and he read to them from Isaiah's prophecy. He's there as the visiting rabbi, the visiting preacher, and he's handed the scroll of Isaiah's prophecy, and he read to them. He found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me." Anointed, that's connected to the word Christ; keep that in mind. "He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He

has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty of those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." After reading that portion, Jesus rolled up the scroll; he gave it back to the attendant. He sat down, which in that day was the position of the teacher, the public preacher, I wouldn't mind going back to that and have you stand and I sit down. But nonetheless, he sat down and he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Audacious claim, wouldn't you say? "That Bible passage is about me," he said.

Never was there someone more meek and mild than Jesus, and yet never was there someone who was so clearly and appropriately self-centered. He calls us to worship him. It's a messianic claim he just made. He's telling him that he, himself, had fulfilled the words of the servant of the Lord. People could clearly see at that time that this was no mere man. They, actually it says right there, "They spoke well of him. They marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. They said, "Is this not Joseph's son?" I mean, Certainly, there must be something more than carpentry that explains this guy.

Later in the same chapter, verse 46, Luke 4:46, Jesus cast out a demon there. He demonstrates authority, power over malevolent forces in the spiritual realm, and people understood perfectly that this is no mere man. They're all amazed, and they say to one another, "What is this word? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, they come out."

Scroll ahead, if you'd like to, to Luke 8:25. Luke 8:25, remember, this is the storm on the sea. Jesus is sleeping. The disciples wake him up because they're terrified. And here they witness the most incredible thing: power over impersonal, destructive forces of nature. It says there, Luke 8:25, "He rebuked the wind and the raging waves, and they ceased, and there was calm." Jesus spoke to the wind, here. I mean, he's speaking to the air, to the moving molecules. He's, he's commanding the energy of the waves. He's controverting natural laws of physics by his spoken word. The disciples asked the question, verse 25, who, who then is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?

The real stumbling block for the Jews, though, came when he had the audacity to take upon himself what is widely recognized, rightly recognized, as the prerogative of God. Twice so far in Luke's Gospel the disciples have been present when Jesus told someone, "Your sins are forgiven." That's something God can do. And either Jesus has just blasphemed, or he has the right to say such a thing. Which is it? Jesus told a paralytic, Luke 5:20, "Man, your sins are forgiven you." And the Pharisees are there hearing this, watching him perform the healing, but hearing this they immediately raise the question about identity: "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Here we see that the Pharisees are theologically accurate but confessionally, they just committed blasphemy against God and his Christ. Wow!

Later in Luke 7, end of Luke 7, Jesus there told a notoriously sinful woman, one who had though, she believed; she'd come to faith in Christ, she worshiped at his feet and she, he turned to her and said, "Your sins are forgiven," and those who heard him then began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" Again, they understood the theology. They could even understand maybe something about who



he is. This is no mere man; this is something else. You know what their sin is, though? They stayed sitting in their seats. They didn't join this forgiven woman, falling before Jesus' feet and worshiping him.

I hear this a lot today, oh, I just remain agnostic about those issues. I don't want to talk about religion or politics or anything like that. So I just kind of, I just kinda stay on the sidelines. You know what Jesus says? You're sinning. You either get on your feet and worship me as one of my followers, or you might as well start grabbing the hammer and the nails and crucify me. Because there are only two options. If you stay on the sidelines, you're staying on the sidelines and watching a crucifixion. Jesus does not leave us in a state of indifference. He does not leave us in a state of agnosticism on this issue. He doesn't allow it.

Three popular opinions in verse 19. They're totally insufficient to explain Jesus. Yes, considering Jesus as another prophet or even a great prophet, as one commentator said, "These opinions indicate his pre-eminence in the popular mind. These

opinions enshrine him among the stellar figures in Israel's long and illustrious history." But listen, that is not good enough. While God did amazing things through the preaching of John the Baptist, he performed powerful works through Elijah and Moses, but none of them, not John, not Elijah, not Moses, nor any of the ancient prophets, none of them ever claimed to forgive sins. The strictly human answer to the question of Jesus' identity is utterly insufficient, but even further that, it's an insult to Jesus' identity. James Edwards said this, "To designate Jesus as a new Moses or Elijah, or as we often hear today, the greatest teacher or moral example who ever lived, is ultimately to deny his uniqueness, for it simply identifies him as the re-emergence or greater example of an earlier prototype." End quote. That's exactly right. Jesus is something new. That's why he was miraculously conceived in the womb of Mary. New, new humanity and those who are joined to Christ by faith, in union with him, they are part of a new race of humanity.

In all the racial conversation, you hear, this race, versus, that race, versus that race or that race and I just say, no, look there's a human race; there's one race. But if I want to be really accurate, that's actually not true. There are

actually two races. There's the race of the human unredeemed who remain in Adam and then there's the race of the redeemed who are in Christ. I'm always reminded, as I think about this, of the words of the inimitable C.S. Lewis, who says, "We must never commit the foolish sin of saying, 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God.'"

As Lewis so famously said, "That is the one thing we must not say. A man that was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He'd either be a lunatic on a level of the man who says he's a poached egg," I guess that's meaningful in England, "or else he'd be the devil of hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was and is the Son of God, or else a madman, or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon, or you can, call, fall at his feet and call him, Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to." End quote. Well-spoken, Mr. Lewis.

So point one, the setting is prayer, by which God will manifest his sovereign grace to these disciples. And then point number two: By this first question Jesus has helped his disciples clear away the insufficiency, and really the insult, of popular opinion. And now, having set the scene, having cleared away all confusion, let's get to the answer.

That's our third point for this morning, as we see point three: Jesus elicits the good confession. Jesus elicits, e.l.i.c.i.t, elicits the good confession. That is to say, he draws forth or draws out the good confession. Look at verse 20, "Jesus said to them, but 'Who do you say that I am?'" It's a little difficult to notice it in the English text, but in the original, Jesus has made an emphatic distinction. He's made a distinction, here, between the crowds in verse 19 and then his disciples in verse 20. When he asks them the question, he says, But you, "Who do you say that I am?" It's emphatic, there, in the language. The unenlightened masses were lost in the confusion of speculation, going back and forth in debates about public, human opinion. But these illuminated disciples, graced by God, they see clearly, and they are about to make the good confession. Peter answered the question. Jesus addressed the

question to them all, but Peter steps in, as he always does; he stepped and he answers, end of verse 20, and he answered simply. He answered straightforwardly. This is Peter at his best. He just answers this, "The Christ of God." "The Christ of God."

Bingo. That is exactly the right answer. And not only that, folks, but that is the only sufficient answer to the question Jesus asked: "Who do you say that I am?" Jesus is the Christ of God, full stop! The Christ, that's his anointing, it's his commission, it's his role, it's his power, it's the nature of his ministry. "Of God", it's his origin, it's his source, it explains all his power, his authority, his absoluteness. The Christ of God is born in a manger. That answer, short as it is, is the exclusive and authoritative key to eternal salvation. It speaks of the exclusivity of salvation in Christ and in Christ alone, and the absolute authority of God and God alone, as revealed in his perfectly sufficient word, and in his beloved son. Once he revealed his son, the Apostles explained his son, God stops revealing. That's it.

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Grace

Look at Christ. The word, Christ, many people today think of that as Jesus' last name. It's actually a title. It's a designation, not a name. Although if we think of somebody's name as that which characterizes that person, it's really not wrong to keep the two, Jesus and Christ, very closely connected. It's inaccurate, but it's not entirely wrong to see Christ, as his last name. It is who he is. You can see through the rest of the New Testament, the writings of Paul, Peter, they keep those names closely connected together, Jesus Christ, Christ Jesus. But Christ really is, technically speaking, it's a title. It's the Greek word *christos*, which translates the Hebrew word *mashiach* from a verb *mashach*, which means, to anoint with oil, literally, to pour oil over somebody's head and let it drip down. You can think, I can think of nothing ickier than that. The Israelites, by commandment of God through the Law and by the Prophets, they would anoint with oil those who were set apart by God for special offices; prophets, priests, kings.

Jesus is the prophet, as we already said, that Moses predicted, Deuteronomy 18:15. He's the one God promised, Deuteronomy 18:18. He's also the fulfillment of an eternal priesthood which is greater than the priesthood of Aaron, of

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Israel. God promised, Psalm 110 verse 4, speaking about Christ and by the way, Psalm 110, this section of Psalm 110 is the most quoted Old Testament verse in the New Testament. Jesus himself quotes it, pointing to himself. It says there, "You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek." Verse 1 says, "The Lord said to my lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.'" The writer of the Hebrews shows that Jesus fulfilled that promise. Hebrews 5, Hebrews 6, Hebrews 7, he's our great High Priest, who has an eternal priesthood, who never has to offer, first, sacrifices for his own sins and then sacrifices for everybody else. He has no sin, so when he offers, he offers himself, once for all, a perfect substitute, a perfect sacrifice for sins of all who believe, for all time. That's why he's the great High Priest.

But the Christ, more specifically, more particularly and technically, speaks to the office of king. Jesus is the King of God's kingdom. We heard earlier this morning that Jesus was born a king, that he is the Christ, the Chosen Messiah of God. He is the promised Son of David, king of Israel, who is going to rule an everlasting kingdom. When he comes, he will establish a government on this earth, the kind of government that you and I

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have always hoped for, one that's characterized by truth and righteousness, rather than lies and compromise. A government that brings a profound and everlasting peace that has no end. Why is the nature of the kingdom thus? It's because of who he is. It's because of who he represents. As Isaiah said, "His name shall be called 'Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.'" He bears the burden of ruling, the governments' on his shoulders, and as the Christ, God's chosen King, God's chosen ruler, he rules here on earth below to execute the will of God in heaven above. He fulfills the perfect will of God because he is loyal to God due to a special relationship with God as his Father. Not only is Jesus the son of David, but as the angel said to Mary, Jesus is also "Son of the Most High." The Holy Spirit of God caused his conception apart from the normal union of a man and a woman, which means, as I said, Jesus is the originator of a new humanity. As the Son of God, he is holy, he possesses a divine nature, he's completely separate from sin, perfectly righteous. As the Son of God, he's the only one who can represent God to humanity. But also as the Son of Man, Jesus is the only one who can represent humanity, a new humanity, before God. It's this God-man who is the only hope, he is the only one who can save his people from their sins by dying for their sins. The only king that I know



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who died for his people before he ruled his people; died for their sins to reconcile them to God, making them join the very profound union in the kingdom itself.

Listen, that's the joyful good news that the angels proclaimed from heaven when Jesus was born. Luke 2:11: "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior," who is who, "Christ the Lord."

So when Peter confessed, "You are the Christ of God," he may have confessed there more than he understood at the time. But he continued to learn, taught even here in this context by Jesus himself, illuminated by the Holy Spirit of God. He received divine revelation as an Apostle of Jesus Christ. He came to understand fully and completely, as John did, that Jesus was none other than the Word "who became flesh and dwelt among us." And he, like all the Apostles, have "seen his glory, glory as of the only son from the Father, full of grace and truth" or you could say the fulfillment of all grace, fulfillment of all truth. That identity, "the Christ of God," says it all.

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Listen, if you get the answer to the question right, if you submit to this Christ of God, who is your sovereign King, God will lead you into all truth. You enter into a saving relationship with God through Jesus Christ. He demands your allegiance, first, by calling you to trust him as Savior. And the first step of following him as Lord is to see him as your Savior. That's what Jesus meant in verse 22, when he predicted his death for sins, his resurrection from the dead. It's for the salvation of all who put their trust in him.

As we kept reading, you can see the path of Christian discipleship is paved with suffering and sacrifice. Jesus said, Luke 9:23, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily," it's not wearing the jewelry, it's not giving up chocolate for the month that is your cross. No, taking up your cross, it's a torture implement. It's a way of executing criminals. Will you identify yourself with he who is called the greatest criminal in the world? Will you identify yourself to such a degree that you'll die with him, not just die ultimately, but will you die daily to self? "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me.

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For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it."

What about you this Christmas? Who do you say that Jesus is? Will you turn away from popular opinion? Will you face and embrace the rejection of the world to embrace Jesus Christ? There's one popular voice out there expressing an abhorrent anti-Christ sentiment. He said this about Jesus, quote, "Jesus was a loser, a failed carpenter. He was a savior because he was crucified. I like people that weren't crucified." End quote. Paul helps us understand that kind of blasphemy. Paul said, 1 Corinthians 1:23, "We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles; but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

Beloved, if you get the question right, if you rightly, correctly identify Jesus as the Christ of God, if you see him, the Lord Jesus, as the Christ of God, you see his power and you see his wisdom, guess what? You're among the called. You're in good company with Jesus Christ. You're counted among those whom

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Jesus prays for, as he did his own disciples, here in this setting, in the context of prayer. And you will embrace him as the Christ of God, believing in him for salvation and following him both into the suffering of the path of the cross, but also the glory of the cross, living forever in eternal life. Let's pray.

Our Father, our Father but also the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we thank you for sending us the Christ of God, and we thank you for revealing to us the true identity that Jesus is the Christ of God. We thank you that he is ours by faith. We thank you that you have given him to us, and you've given us to him, a people for his own possession. We thank you that those of us who proclaim him, confess him by faith, follow him in obedience.

We thank you that we are your people, that we are servants of the King. We belong to your kingdom. And we ask this Christmas that you would help us to profess correctly, boldly, but humbly, profess Jesus Christ as our only Lord and Savior. Help us around the Christmas table throughout this Christmas

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season, with family and friends, we'll help us, we, we pray that you help us to have those conversations with a spirit of grace and truth; help us to be humbly bold in these things pertaining to the Gospel.

We thank you for the salvation that we find in Jesus Christ. We thank you for the, the glory of the incarnation that the son of God became Son of Man and in him we're united, two natures: one divine, one human. We thank you for this profound mystery that we've come to believe, the holy trinity that we confess. We thank you for, for the truth that is ours in Christ. It's in his name we pray. Amen.