

Mark 8:27-38

27 Now Jesus and his disciples went to Caesarea Philippi¹, and on the way,² he asked his disciples saying, “Who do people say that I am?” 28 And they answered him saying, “John the Baptist, and others Elijah, and still others, one of the prophets.”³ 29 And he asked them, “But who do you say that I

¹ When reading the gospels, not only does the context of a particular story (i.e. where this story occurs in the midst of the larger gospel) play a significant role, but the reference points (i.e. towns, names of particular people) within a particular story helps clarify the importance or magnitude of that narrative. In approaching Mark 8:27-38, it is important to note some of the features that make up the reference points that we can easily overlook. One reference in particular is the city of Caesarea Philippi.

At first glance, we are able to infer a lot about this particular city located in ancient Palestine. By the name alone, we know that this is a Roman city that is highly favorable to the emperor. But long before it was a Roman city, Caesarea Philippi was known by other names and involved in the worship of pagan gods connected to fertility and agriculture.

Located about 14 miles north of the Sea of Galilee, this ancient town was a center for the worship of the Canaanite deity Baal and was possibly the location for Baal-gad or Baal-hermon as found in the Old Testament (Joshua 11:17; Judges 3:3; and 1 Chronicles 5:23), but the evidence is not conclusive (R.M. Grant, “Caesarea Philippi” *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, A-D* (Abingdon: Nashville, 1962), 480). Following the Greek occupation of the region, the town was renamed “Paneas after the Greek god Pan whose shrine was there (still reflected in its modern Arab name, Baniyas). Herod the Great had built a splendid marble temple in which the emperor (Augustus) was honored as a god. The emperor was the power behind Herod’s own throne, having granted him the territory, and Herod’s son, Herod Philip, had enlarged the town into a proper Hellenistic (or Greek) city and renamed it Caesarea in honor of the Roman emperor (Eugene Boring, *Mark* (Westminster/John Knox Press: Louisville, 2009), 237).” There can be no mistake that Jesus brought his disciples to this point in his ministry for a specific purpose.

Based on the history of a place like Caesarea Philippi, we can see the politically charged layers that are involved with this scene in Jesus’ ministry as well as the religious layers. For not only are we dealing with a city that is a center of influence and imperial power, we are also dealing with a city that bears the marks of pagan worship; not only the worship of the Roman emperor but the Greek God Pan and the Canaanite god, Baal. In the face of all these things, Jesus will ask his most provocative and thought provoking question in all his ministry.

² While most of Jesus’ ministry and conversations thus far have taken place within homes, on a boat, or beside the Sea of Galilee, Mark informs us that on this particular moment and conversation occurs on the way. For Mark, using this phrase does not merely inform us that Jesus and his disciples are traveling, rather it “connotes the way of discipleship. Jesus’ way that now leads from the most distant point in Israel to its capital and temple in Jerusalem, the road to the cross (Boring, 237).” The early church used to speak of discipleship and being Christian in terms of following “the Way (cf. Acts 9:2; 18:25-26; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22).”

³ In asking, “who do folks say that I am,” Jesus isn’t on a fishing expedition to find out how his ministry is going or if people are catching on to what he’s about. Rather it’s a question that sets the disciples up for a moment of confession and doxology. Like good students, the disciples are able to report on what others are saying by repeating much of what was heard in Mark 6:14-15; folks assume that he’s John the Baptist, Elijah, or some other prophetic character sent by God. But while these opinions of Jesus contains bits and pieces of the picture, none of them captures who Jesus is.

am?” And Peter replied, saying, “You are the Christ.”⁴ 30 And he sternly ordered (rebuked) them not to tell anyone about him. 31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and rise again after three days.⁵ 32 He said all this openly, and Peter took him aside and rebuked him. 33 At this he turned around and, looking at his disciples, rebuked Peter, saying, “Get behind me, Satan. For you are thinking not on the things of God, but on human things.”⁶

⁴ At the end of chapter 8 in the Gospel According to Mark, halfway through the gospel, we arrive at the pivotal moment; the question upon which the whole gospel turns as we are taken from abstract assumptions about Jesus and confronted with the reality of who he is towards us.

Getting away from questions about what he does, how he acts, or where he comes from, Jesus gets to the heart of discipleship by raising the priority of the “who” question: “but who do *you* say that I am?” Jesus encounters his disciples (and each one of us) with a question that demands a response. Because he has already embraced them as his own out of the freedom of his love and power he now calls for their response. In that moment, Peter embraces the seriousness of the question and by his lips confesses the fundamental Christian confession regarding who Jesus is: “You are the Christ.” It was a primitive and limited answer, to be sure, but a doxological confession of faith nonetheless.

⁵ Immediately following Peter’s confession, Jesus sternly orders the disciples to remain silent on this issue and tell no one. In Greek, the word translated as strictly ordered is the same word for rebuke. This makes it difficult for us in English for no one word means the same thing. In Greek, two literal understandings of the word *epitimaō* are “to give strict orders (a warning looking ahead to an action) and ‘rebuke’ (a warning looking back on an action) (Boring, 235).” Throughout Mark’s Gospel, this is the word that is used to rebuke demons, rebuke the sea, and to rebuke Peter in verse 33. It is clear that Jesus is very serious about keeping the revelation of who he is as the messiah within the inner circle until the appropriate time. Following his stern order, Jesus begins to unpack what the ministry of the messiah or the Christ is to look like.

Now, most within ancient Judaism expected the messiah to be a triumphant king who would win back the kingdom, kick out the Romans, and instill religious purity and order throughout the state. They connected the salvation from God that the messiah would bring with national blessing and national supremacy akin to the reign of David all those years before. This is not the kind of messiah that God has provided for his people; this is not the kind of christ God has provided by penetrating into the depths of humanity in, through, and as the man Jesus to bring about the true salvation of his people. Jesus informs his disciples that they’ve had the wrong idea about God and his messiah all along. The Son of Man is supposed to suffer, is supposed to be rejected, is supposed to be killed, and ultimately, the Son of Man is to be raised up again. On the way outside of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus reinterprets everything the disciples thought they knew about the mission and ministry of God within the world.

⁶ Having read this passage so many times, it comes as no surprise to us that Jesus rebukes Peter after Peter rebukes him. He’s Jesus; who wants to mess with him. Yet, in the flow of the gospel narrative, Peter’s response is quite natural and would be the natural response any one of us would offer if we were in his shoes. Peter could not think of a messiah who was against the current power structure of Israel nor could he conceive of a messiah who would die. Those two characteristics alone are very counter-intuitive for him. That is why Peter calls Jesus out by rebuking him; assuming that it is Jesus who has caved under the stress of the prophetic office he bears and even possibly possessed by some force that is opposed to God’s will. Yet it is Jesus who in turn rebukes Peter, putting him in his place by affirming the glory of the gospel.

“For Jesus, it is the avoidance of messianic suffering, not resignation to it, that constitutes the devilish temptation that must be exorcised. Both parties to this exchange, it should be noted, have accepted

34 Then he summoned the crowd with his disciples and said to them, “Whoever wants to be a follower of me, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me.”⁷ 35 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel will save it. For what profit is there for one to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37 For what could one give in exchange for their life? 38 For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

the idea that Jesus is the messiah; the point at issue is exactly how his messianic victory over the forces of evil will be accomplished. For Peter, steeped in traditional versions of Davidic messiahship, the struggle anticipated is one in which victory will be accomplished through a military assault on flesh-and-blood enemies. According to such a scenario, the premature death of Jesus, the messiah and therefore the captain of the armies of God, would be a devastating blow to God’s forces and a spectacular coup for the opposition. For Jesus, however, the messianic victory will in the first instance be a cosmic one over supernatural foes, and it will be achieved not by a conventional battle but by death and resurrection (Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2009), 614).” Peter’s mind is not set on the mission and ministry of God as revealed by God (cf. Isaiah 55:8); rather he is focused solely on his interpretation of the mission and ministry of God without any reference to God’s revelation. He’s called to repentance by Jesus, and, as we’ll learn a few verses later, Peter is called to follow him closely.

⁷ We’ve arrived at the second most famous and influential feature of this brief passage in Mark: the call to follow. It is here that we learn the true “cost of discipleship,” what it means to follow Jesus as well as the meaning for our lives.

In an act that is surprising, given the nature of Jesus’ ministry throughout Mark, Jesus calls not only his disciples to attention but summons the whole crowd following him to hear what he is about to announce. “Whoever wants to be a follower of me, let them deny (or renounce) themselves, take up their cross, and follow me.” These words are a staggering blow to the ego and to all assumptions that following Jesus will bring with it a showering of blessings in terms of recognition, status, happiness, wealth, or any other states of existence that play into the principalities and powers rather than the ministry of God. And yet, again, we’ve heard this call so many times, we miss out on how truly staggering and affirming this pronouncement of Jesus is.

“The call to deny oneself does not mean to relinquish the enjoyment of certain things, as though doing without or enduring suffering as such made one holy or a disciples of Jesus. The word translated ‘deny’ is found elsewhere in Mark only in reference to Peter’s denial of Jesus (14:30, 31, 72). ‘Deny’ is thus the opposite of ‘confess,’ ‘acknowledge’; the hearers are called to deny themselves rather than deny Jesus, that is, no longer to make oneself the top priority and the center of one’s own universe, to reverse the Adamic decision made by the anthropos (human being) of Genesis 3 who wanted to be like God, and let God be God (Boring, 244).” Jesus leads us to the heart of denying ourselves and picking up our crosses: it isn’t about bearing suffering and enduring pain because that transforms us into good disciples. Rather denying ourselves and picking up our crosses is recognizing that Jesus is the priority in our lives; that he crucifies our egos, reminds us that we aren’t the lords of the cosmos and the saviors of the world, and invites us to participate in his mission and ministry to the world, to become disciples by following him. This goes way beyond imitation; the path of discipleship is a path of following. There might be rejection and discomfort and ultimately death, but the way of discipleship is a way that is hitched to the back of Jesus in his ministry so that in the end he becomes the center of all we say and do. Thus the way of denying ourselves is the way of confessing Jesus Christ.