

Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, “Who do people say I am?”

²⁸ *They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”*

²⁹ *“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”*

Peter answered, “You are the Christ.”

³⁰ *Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.*

³¹ *He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.* ³² *He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.*

³³ *But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”*

³⁴ *Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. (Mark 8:27-35)*

What Does Your Confession Mean?

Confess. What do you think of when you hear that word? Do you picture a TV detective pressuring a suspect to admit they’re guilty? If you turn your thoughts to the church, do you think of a Roman Catholic confessional booth? Do you think of admitting your sins and your guilt to your pastor or to God? If you do, you’re not wrong. We often use the word “confess” that way. But in just a few minutes, I’m going to say something like, “Let’s confess our faith using the words of the Nicene Creed.” We won’t be admitting we did something wrong. We’ll be testifying to the truth of the gospel. What does that have to do with confessing our sins? In both cases, we’re stating that something is true. In the one case, we’re admitting that we are sinners and in the other case, we’re admitting to the world that we trust in Jesus to take that sin away. That concept of confessing Christ is what our gospel lesson focuses on today. Jesus asks his disciples for a confession. But he doesn’t stop there. Our gospel lesson shows that it’s easy to make a confession without really thinking through what it means. Today, God’s Word challenges us to go deeper. My friends, **what does your confession mean?**

I.

In our gospel lesson Jesus and his disciples were near Caesarea Philippi. That was a city far in the north of Israel, at the feet of Mt. Hermon. The disciples may not have known it yet, but from Mt. Hermon, Jesus would begin a long, slow, final trip to Jerusalem to bring his entire ministry to its climax. That’s where Jesus posed his question to the disciples: **“Who do people say I am?”** He already knew the answer. But he was setting up the all-important second question, **“Who do you say I am?”** Jesus was giving his disciples an opportunity to confess their faith. Notice, Jesus himself underlined the difference between our confession and the way the world around us understands him. The people of Jesus’ day said that he was John the Baptist come back from the dead or Elijah or one of the prophets. But Jesus spent no time on those mistaken ideas. He wanted to hear his disciples confess their faith. And Peter confessed for the group that Jesus was the Christ – he was the promised Messiah or Savior that Israel had been waiting for ever since the time of Abraham.

Jesus immediately began to teach them what Peter’s confession really meant. Mark says, **“He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.”** Now, is there anything there that surprises you? It’s all stuff we’ve heard all our lives. We confess it all Sunday after Sunday. Even kids in our preschool could probably hit the highlights of that confession.

So why did Peter react the way he did? When he heard Jesus say these things, he took Jesus aside for a private conversation. Then Peter actually began to rebuke Jesus. Now, the Bible doesn’t tell us his exact words, but I think we can figure out what his point was: Peter didn’t like the idea that the leaders of the Jews were going to reject Jesus. Peter didn’t like the idea that Jesus would suffer and die. You have to wonder if Peter even heard the part that said Jesus would rise. When Jesus actually did die, there is no evidence that his disciples ever understood that part of the plan. Probably, that’s because they still had the idea that most Jewish

people at that time believed: the Messiah would come and set up an earthly kingdom, like King David had done. He would drive the Romans out and rule Israel and indeed the whole world. In that scenario, what would happen to the twelve apostles? They would be his cabinet, his court, his most trusted advisors and companions. They would go from being fishermen to rulers of the world. Peter didn't want to hear that all his most cherished dreams were going to fail.

Of course, we know that Peter would later be an eyewitness of the resurrected Christ and he would carry the gospel message forward as an apostle of Jesus. But at this moment, his confession had the right words but the wrong content. He still didn't understand why Jesus was there. He still was following the way his society thought. And that danger exists for us as well. We can come here Sunday after Sunday and repeat the words of the Nicene and the Apostles Creeds. We can send our kids to catechism class and have them memorize the First, Second and Third Articles. And we still might view Jesus and his work the way our society does.

Now today, denies no one that Jesus died. And everyone knows that Christians believe he rose, although many people do deny that. But what does it all mean? Sadly, there are lots of people who reduce Jesus' death to nothing more than an example of what love should be. They view it as an act that was intended to change the world and make society more just and loving. They dismiss the whole idea of sin and judgment and God's grace and forgiveness. They fail to grasp that Jesus promised to change the world only when he returns. We might think that we're immune from thinking that way. But we live in this society. We absorb its thinking, sometimes without even realizing it. Jesus shows us today that a true confession of him has to be more than just saying the right words. We need to understand that he is not what our unbelieving society wants him to be. We need to reject all those false ideas and confess the Christ who went to Jerusalem to be rejected by the society that didn't believe him and then to die.

Why did he do that? Because our sin needed it. I'm not just talking about the sinful words and actions that we all do and say every day. Those words and actions are symptoms of a much deeper reality: we human beings have sinful hearts. That's why we absorb the sinful ideas our society puts out. The sinner inside us is constantly looking for ways to slide us away from Jesus, to change our view of him into something that an unbeliever would be more comfortable with. The sinner inside us hates being a Christian. That sinner makes us guilty before God even before he gets us to do and say sinful things. He gives birth to sinful desires and sinful thoughts. And God counts those thoughts and desires as sins.

They deserve his punishment. But Jesus made that long trip from Caesarea Philippi to be rejected and murdered to pay for all the guilt that the sinner inside us keeps piling up. Jesus never turned away from suffering or hell or death because that's what we needed for him to free us. And Jesus rose to announce to the world that we are forgiven, that God is satisfied. He rose to assure you and me that all our sin is gone. And every true confession of Christ not only says that, but embraces that truth. **What does your confession mean? It means that Jesus gave up his life for you.**

II.

That was hard for Peter to wrap his brain around. But the next point was even harder. Peter had to give up all his dreams of a worldly kingdom and embrace God's plan for the church. What is that plan? The church is at war with the world. The church is constantly at the fringe of society, oppressed and persecuted and hated. The church suffers here while we wait for glory. Is that what you signed up for when you were confirmed? That's what Jesus promises us today.

He said to Peter, **"Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."** That had to sting, don't you think? I mean, if I got mad at one of your kids in school and called him or her "You devil!" don't you think my phone would ring? Why did Jesus say this? To underline for Peter how far from his confession he was getting. The things of men – human ideas about Jesus – only lead us to the devil. We have to see Jesus the way that God shows him. We have to embrace the Christian life and the church the way that God designed it.

What does that look like? Jesus said, **"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."** Following Jesus is an exercise in self-denial. An obvious example is bringing an offering. If your offering really reflects the way that God blessed you, it's going to be a significant amount of money for you. What else could you use that money for? How many movies could you go see? How many times could you upgrade your smart phone? Instead you deny yourself and follow him. The same could be said about coming to church. Nobody wants to sleep in more than me. Yet, here we are on Sunday,

hopefully, most Sundays. And how much time do we spend working in our congregation, helping with its mission? How much time do we spend at home talking with our kids about their faith and reading the Bible together and praying together as a family? We might have to give up fifteen more minutes of sleep to do that before we leave in the morning. We might have to miss fifteen minutes of our favorite show to do that at night. But the Christian life means denying ourselves and following Jesus. Again and again, we put the pleasures of sin aside and we do what God calls us to do. Jesus even says we take up our cross and follow him. That means we do those things not just when they're easy. We do them when they're hard.

Then Jesus said, **“For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.”** What does he mean by “whoever wants to save his life”? He isn't talking about wearing seatbelts so you don't die in a car crash or waving to a lifeguard if you start to drown. He's talking about serving the kind of life that this world holds out as “the good life.” It's the life you see on TV commercials. Every commercial is designed to tell you that you deserve a better car, nicer clothes or the newest tablet. The message is that making money and spending money will make you happy. And you also need to be beautiful and popular and successful.

And Jesus teaches us, if that is what your life is all about, you will lose your life. What does he mean? He means you'll become an idol worshipper. Money or popularity or creature comforts will become your god and you will die and spend eternity in hell. Now, it might not happen all at once. It might take years of slowly sliding away from Jesus. But if this life is what your life is all about, your faith in Christ will die.

But whoever loses his life for Jesus and the gospel will save it. If we make the time that God gives us here all about Jesus, then he will feed our faith when we hear the gospel and he bring us home to heaven. Now, does that mean we can never be happy here? That we can never do something nice for ourselves? No. God loves us. He blesses us every single day. God calls us to bring all our hurts and all our cares to him in prayer and often he grants us relief and even joy here. God loves us and he wants us to find joy in the blessings he gives us. But he wants us to recognize that they are gifts of love that he gives to his children while they are walking the road to heaven. And if getting to heaven means giving any or all of those blessings up, he wants us to not even hesitate. Jesus comes first because he gives us eternal life.

My friends, do we have that perspective on life? Not always. Not one hundred percent. We all fall into putting our dreams and our desires ahead of God's plan, don't we? It's so easy to do because we live here, we hurt here, we have fun here. Heaven is just a promise that we can't see yet. So we fall into that sin. But that's why Jesus finished that trip to Jerusalem. That's why he let himself be arrested and tormented and murdered. He died for the sin that we can't ever escape from in this life. He set us free from all our guilt and all the hell that should follow. He conquered death for us and gave us eternal life. My friends, we are forgiven and loved. Because we are, God gives us the faith that can and does dedicate our lives to serving him. **What does your confession mean? It means that you give up your life for Jesus.**

By the power of God, we will do that. Every time we hear that Jesus loves us, that he died and rose for us, that he forgives and he will take us home, the Holy Spirit is working and changing us. Hear that message. Fill up with God's power. And dedicate your life to him. Amen.