

“ARE YOU THE CHRIST?”**MARK 14:53-64**

Titles are funny things. Over 37 years ago I got “Reverend” attached to my name when I was ordained to ministry. I’m still not comfortable with that title. There’s an image associated with the title “Reverend” that I don’t like very much – holier-than-thou, kind of a wimp, out of touch with real life. I admit the title “Reverend” hasn’t been of any great practical value to me; however, I can think of one time playing the “Reverend” card actually did me some good. It was my first winter in Ohio and our street was under a foot or two of drifted snow. A city snow plow never appeared on my street. Can you imagine? Finally, I called downtown and told the gal on the other end of the phone, “Hi, this is REVEREND Breusch calling. I just wanted someone down there to know that if I have to respond to an emergency from someone in my church, I’m not going to be able to get there because of the unplowed snow on my street!” A minor miracle occurred that day! An hour later the street got plowed!

Questions Jesus answered during Holy Week. That’s our message series this year as we approach the most significant, important time on the calendar for Christians all over the world. As we hear the questions different people asked Jesus and how He answered them during those seven days between what we call Palm Sunday (next Sunday this year) and Easter Sunday – (April 1st this year), it gives us the opportunity to reflect again on the importance of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. The question we consider this morning was asked of Jesus on the night before His crucifixion. Let’s read the Scripture passage now we want to think about today. Jesus had just been arrested. He was brought before a group of Jewish leaders known as the Sanhedrin which was kind of like a supreme court for Jewish affairs. Rome controlled Israel militarily at this time, but it delegated some governing duties to the Sanhedrin – especially anything having to do with Jewish religion. The high priest – think of him as a kind of a chief justice or judge – was a man named Caiaphas. He asked Jesus this question, “‘Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?’” (Mk. 14:61 NIV) The word “Christ” was and is a title. Caiaphas wanted to know if Jesus would accept the title of Christ. How Jesus answered the question gives us an all-important insight into who Jesus considered Himself to be and why that matters to us this morning. First, ...

THE TITLE JESUS AVOIDED: CHRIST OR MESSIAH.

The single most familiar title for Jesus today is “Christ.” Do you remember when you first discovered with some surprise that Christ wasn’t actually Jesus’ last name? Joseph and Mary Christ didn’t live at 777 Olive Street in Nazareth and have a kid named Jesus Christ! No, Christ is a title. It comes from the Greek word “Christos” which is a translation of the Hebrew word “Messiah.” In fact, Messiah and Christ refer to exactly the same title in two different languages – one is Hebrew, the other is Greek. It meant “the anointed one” in both languages. Someone called by God to do something special.

Here’s what’s fascinating. While the title “Christ” is the most well known and most used title for Jesus, He never called Himself by that title. In fact, He clearly avoided it at almost every opportunity and seemed uncomfortable with it. For example, on one

occasion Jesus asked His disciples, “Who do people say I am?’ ‘Well,’ they replied, ‘some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say you are one of the other prophets.’ Then he asked them, ‘But who do you say I am?’ Peter replied, ‘You are the Messiah.’ But Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.” (Mk. 8:27-30 NLT) Why? Jesus avoided the title of Christ because of many misconceptions about what it meant. Sometimes a title can mean so many different things to so many different people that it’s no longer helpful to use it. The Jews living at the same time of Jesus had a wide variety of opinions about what the Messiah was going to be like and what he would do. Many of those opinions weren’t biblical at all.

One opinion, however, was shared by most Jews in Jesus’ day. The Messiah would become the political, national king of the Jewish people after he ran the hated Romans out of the country. That’s another reason Jesus avoided the title Christ. His mission wasn’t to become the literal, earthly king of Israel and lead a revolt against Rome. And yet some people were eager to think of Jesus in that way. Even His disciples probably thought of Jesus in those terms. After all, they’d get into arguments about what positions each would hold in Jesus’ future kingdom. “Then they began to argue among themselves about who would be the greatest among them.” (Lk. 22:24 NLT) Can you imagine it? “I’m going to be Vice-President! Big deal. I’m going to be Secretary of State! Yeah, so what? I’m going to be Secretary of Defense.”

I suggest there was yet another reason Jesus avoided the title of Christ. I think it’s possible Jesus was tempted by it. We easily forget that while Jesus never committed a sin, He was severely tempted. The Bible says, “This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin.” (Heb. 4:15 NLT) That means Jesus was tempted to hate, tempted to lie, tempted to steal, tempted to lust, tempted to be self-centered, and tempted to misuse His power. Whoa... back up on that last one! Tempted to misuse His power. We’ve all discovered through painful personal experience that the devil tempts us in our areas of weakness. He’s extremely strategic and smart. He knows our individual areas of strength and weakness. He knows what buttons to push, what triggers to squeeze. He rarely tempts us in areas where we’re strong. He goes after the areas where we’re vulnerable.

Jesus’ greatest temptation as a human being might well have been in the area of using the power at His disposal for ungodly ends. Do you remember when the devil tempted Jesus out in the desert for forty days and nights? He tempted Jesus to misuse His power. “You’re really hungry, Jesus, aren’t You? Why don’t You turn these stones into bread? You have the power to do it, so do it. You’re the Son of God, right? Why not prove it by doing something miraculous like jumping off the roof of the temple and surviving? Show everyone how powerful You really are. I know you want to control all of the kingdoms of the world and You should! Why don’t you bow down and worship me, Jesus, because I can hand all of them over to You? You can be the most powerful person on the planet!” The devil’s temptation of Jesus was all about power. That might reveal to what Jesus was most vulnerable. Think about it! Jesus was born and bred a Jew – a child of Abraham. Jesus knew how to lead people. He had a charismatic personality. He was a gifted communicator. I wonder if there were moments when the

idea of becoming the literal king of Israel and running the Romans out of the country had a certain, strong appeal to the humanity of Jesus. Very tempting!

Maybe that's why Jesus responded to Peter the way He did on one occasion. Right after Peter rightly recognized Jesus as Christ or Messiah in the passage we looked at earlier, Jesus had to rebuke him ever so sternly. Jesus told the disciples His mission involved being killed and rising from the dead. Peter couldn't get his brain around that idea. He couldn't conceive of a Messiah who would suffer, get rejected, and killed by His own people. It completely violated his paradigm of who the Messiah was and what he would do. He tried to talk Jesus out of all this "crucifixion nonsense"! The Bible says, "Jesus turned around and... reprimanded Peter. 'Get away from me, Satan! You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God's.'" (Mk. 8:33 NLT) Jesus really lit Peter up! Why such passion from Jesus? Because avoiding the cross had some attraction to Jesus. He was tempted to avoid the cross. And fulfilling the expectation to become the Messiah everyone wanted might well have been tempting to Jesus, too. But Jesus was wise enough to discern Satan's tactic behind Peter's words.

Without any doubt, "Christ" or "Messiah" was one very loaded title. That's precisely why Caiaphas asked Jesus, "Are you the Christ?" He wanted to trap Jesus. If Jesus said, "No", then Jesus would discredit Himself among the Jewish people – many who believed He was the Messiah. But if Jesus said, "Yes" to being the Christ, then Jesus would be in big trouble with the Romans. If you claimed to be the Messiah or Christ back then, the Romans sat up and took notice of you because they thought you were making yourself the literal king of Israel and no longer subject to the rule of Rome. Caiaphas was one crafty, shrewd dude. As the court proceedings progressed, it became obvious there just wasn't enough evidence to convict Jesus of an offense worthy of execution. The whole plot against Jesus was in danger of unraveling. The Sanhedrin was supposed to be an impartial body – kind of like a jury. It wasn't supposed to prosecute anyone, but when it came to Jesus, the Sanhedrin acted as both prosecutor and jury. Jesus refused to speak on his own behalf. This was entirely correct since the accused wasn't asked to incriminate himself.

So Caiaphas did something unusual and illegal for a high priest. He began to interrogate and prosecute Jesus himself in a capital trial. Caiaphas' strategy emerged quickly enough: "If we can't depend on these lousy witnesses to get their story against Jesus straight, then we'll get Him to say something self-incriminating instead." So Caiaphas demanded an answer from Jesus here on the basis of the most solemn oath know in Israel at that time – something called the Oath of the Testimony. Matthew's version of the same scene put it like this, "I demand in the name of the living God—tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God." (Mt 26:63 NLT) Demanding such an oath was brilliantly evil. Although Jesus wasn't required to give evidence against Himself, He couldn't refuse this solemn challenge. The way Caiaphas phrased his charge was also brilliantly evil. How so? On the one hand, if Jesus admitted to being the Messiah, that wasn't a capital offense. Claiming to be the Messiah wasn't a sufficient reason to execute someone. On the other hand, if Jesus admitted to being the Son of God, that wasn't a capital offense either. Every Jew had the right to call himself a son of God.

But when Caiaphas put those two together – Messiah and Son of God – he was asking Jesus if He claimed to be a divine Messiah; in other words, a Messiah who is Himself God. When Jesus freely admitted He was both Messiah and God in human flesh, He was immediately found guilty of blasphemy by the Sanhedrin and sentenced to death. Now, don't miss the importance of Jesus' complete answer to Caiaphas' question.

THE TITLE JESUS CLAIMED: THE SON OF MAN.

“Then the high priest asked him, ‘Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?’ Jesus said, ‘I AM. And you will see the Son of Man seated in the place of power at God’s right hand and coming on the clouds of heaven,’” (Mk. 14:61-62 NLT) And then Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin went nuts. Why? What is that all about? Jesus accepted Caiaphas’ title here – the Messiah, the Son of God – but He actually expands on it in such a way that no one in that room that night could ever have doubted what and who He was claiming to be. Jesus didn’t go around calling Himself either Messiah (Christ) or Son of God during His years of ministry. He did, however, refer to Himself as the Son of Man many, many times. In fact, the title “the Son of Man” was the primary way Jesus referred to Himself. Now here’s something ironic but very important to understand. The title “Son of Man” actually pointed to the deity of Jesus more clearly than the title “Son of God.” Why? All Jews considered themselves sons of God. No, they weren’t claiming to be divine beings, to be sure, but they were claiming to have a special relationship with God. If Jesus had used that title for Himself – Son of God - most folk would have misunderstood His real intent. Instead, Jesus preferred the title “Son of Man” because it didn’t come loaded down with preconceived baggage.

The Old Testament book of Daniel was written hundreds of years before Jesus was born. Jesus had read it. One passage resonated with Him and He quoted it before the Sanhedrin that night. Daniel wrote, “As my vision continued..., I saw someone like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient One and was led into his presence. He was given authority, honor, and sovereignty over all the nations of the world, so that people of every race and nation and language would obey him. His rule is eternal—it will never end. His kingdom will never be destroyed.” (Dan. 7:13-14 NLT) How did Jesus respond to Caiaphas’ question? “And you will see the Son of Man seated in the place of power at God’s right hand and coming on the clouds of heaven.” (Mk. 14:62 NLT) Jesus claimed to be the fulfillment of Daniel’s prophecy. He was, is, and will always be the Son of Man.

We don’t have time today to do a full blown study of the title “the Son of Man.” But you should know that a study reveals three great characteristics for whoever turned out to be the Son of Man. First, this was to be someone who is a Heavenly Being, who possesses divine majesty, who is - unmistakably – God. Again, the title “Son of Man” pointed to Jesus’ deity far more than the title “Christ” or “Son of God.” Second, the Son of Man was to be a representative of all people who suffers on their behalf. Jesus completely fulfilled that aspect of the title on the cross when He suffered and died for all people. Thirdly, the Son of Man will be the judge of all people at the end of history. There’s a kind of delicious irony in that scene when Jesus stood before the Sanhedrin.

That night they stood in judgment upon Jesus. One day, they – and all humanity with them – will stand before the judgment seat of Christ – the exalted, unique Son of Man.

Jesus claimed to be this eternal divine Being described in Daniel who received worship and whose kingdom is eternal. Jesus claimed divine majesty for Himself and the most exalted role imaginable in God's plan of salvation for humanity. There are some people out there – some of them very bright New Testament scholars – that scoff at the idea that Jesus ever claimed to be God. They're just plain wrong. By calling Himself the Son of Man and claiming to be the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy, that's exactly who Jesus claimed to be! Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin understood Jesus perfectly well. That's precisely why Caiaphas tore his clothes and said, "Why do we need other witnesses? You have all heard his blasphemy. What is your verdict?" 'Guilty!' they all cried. 'He deserves to die!' (Mk. 14:63-64 NLT)

How could Jesus be both God and human all at the same time? That's a claim non-Christians struggle with mightily. Imagine you're visiting a hospital. You can't find a parking place close to the hospital, so you park way in the back, and now you're lost. You stop another driver in the lot to ask directions, and he kindly says he'll just park beside you and walk with you to wherever you need to go in the hospital. Now suppose as you get to the front of the hospital, you find out this man is actually the chief surgeon of the hospital. As you get near the front door, he says, "Oh, yes, and this is my parking place." He had a superior advantage because of his status. However, because of your needs, he didn't take his rightful parking spot but walked with you the whole way. As he was walking with you, did he stop being a doctor? No. Did he have a parking place? Yes. He had all of those things and at any time he could've laid hold of those privileges and used them, but for your sake he just chose not to in that particular moment. Just because Jesus lived and walked among other human beings, it doesn't mean he was not God. Why didn't Jesus use His divine powers, then? Because it would have given Him an unfair advantage. It would have obscured His humanity. When Jesus walked this Earth, He made the moment-by-moment choice to lay down His privileges, His rights as God, so He could provide salvation to everyone.

Please don't miss the importance of what Jesus said here on the night before His crucifixion. Caiaphas asked Him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" (Mk. 14:61 NLT) Jesus could have answered no to the high priest's question. The case against Jesus would have fallen apart right then and there. He'd have been freed. But if Jesus said yes to Caiaphas' question, the cross was inevitable. Jesus looked wily, crafty Caiaphas in the face and said, "Yes, I AM." The rest is history. But it's history that affects you, me and every other person who has ever lived or who will ever live.

C.S. Lewis observed that, at the end of the day, only three opinions about Jesus make logical sense. Either Jesus was a liar who could have dodged what happened to Him. He claimed to be God when He Himself knew He wasn't God. It's tragic, to be sure, that He died the way He did, but He was a liar. If you want to believe Jesus was a liar, so be it, but you have to give up any notion He was some great moral teacher. He lied at the most fundamental level about who He was – His identity. He can't any more be

someone you admire or look up to. Or you can believe Jesus was a lunatic who deserves your pity not your admiration. At the end of the day, He was a misguided megalomaniac. Again, if you want to believe Jesus was a lunatic, so be it, but take Him off any list of people we should admire. Reject His teachings. Who should follow a madman? Dismiss the fact He's the most influential Person for the last 2,000 years as irrelevant. You have one more option that makes sense. You can recognize Jesus as the Lord – God in human flesh who freely chose to be nailed to a cross in order to save you and me and, then, rose from the dead three days later. If Jesus is who He clearly claimed to be – God in human flesh – and He did what the Bible says He most definitely did – died in your place and my place and rose up again on Easter Day - then He has an eternal claim on your life. He has every right to your worship, your obedience, your life, your very existence. So what will it be? Is Jesus a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord?

Most kingdoms do anything they can to protect their king. That's the whole point of the game of chess, by the way. You protect your king above any other piece on the board, because when the king falls, the kingdom is lost - the game is over. Another example comes from the Allied invasion of Normandy on D-Day, June 6, 1944. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill desperately wanted to join the expeditionary forces and watch the invasion from the bridge of a battleship in the English Channel. U.S. General Dwight Eisenhower was desperate to stop him, for fear that the Prime Minister might be killed in battle. When it became apparent that Churchill couldn't be dissuaded, Eisenhower appealed to a higher authority: England's King George VI. The king went and told Churchill that if it was the Prime Minister's duty to witness the invasion, he could only conclude that it was also his own duty as king to join him on the battleship. At that point Churchill reluctantly agreed to back down. Why? Because he knew he could never expose the King of England to such danger. Jesus did exactly the opposite. With a courage that surpassed that of the greatest king, He surrendered His own body to be crucified. On the cross He offered a king's ransom: His life for the life of His people. And on Easter Sunday, He accomplished the greatest victory any king has ever achieved. He defeated death itself when He rose from the dead.

Caiaphas asked Jesus, "Are you the Christ – the Messiah?" Jesus avoided that title, but only because it was so full of wrong preconceptions and misconceptions. But He never denied who He was and is. God clothed in human flesh. Jesus. Is He a liar, a lunatic, or the King of kings and the Lord of lords who alone is worthy of my worship and obedience? Each of us need to choose who we think Jesus is and then our lives in light of that choice.