

“What Do You Think about the Christ?”

*While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them,
“What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?” (Matthew 22:41-42).*

In his book, “Mere Christianity,” C.S. Lewis wrote: “I am trying here to prevent anyone (from) saying the really foolish thing that people often say about (Christ): ‘I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.’ That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would 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 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” (*Mere Christianity*, 40-41).

Throughout His ministry Jesus guarded His true identity. When He healed the two blind men in Matthew chapter nine, He sternly warned them not to tell anyone what He done. He silenced a demon who addressed Him as the “Holy One of God” (Mark 1:24). He healed a leper and commanded him to, “say nothing to anyone” (1:44). And even after Peter was moved by God to confess that Jesus was “the Christ, the Son of the living God” Jesus strictly charged him and the other disciples to share this information with no one.

At the site of His first miracle, Jesus told His mother that His hour had not yet arrived (John 2:4), but in today’s text, His time has come and in this pivotal account from Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus boldly confronts His enemies. It was the week of Passover and the streets of Jerusalem were packed with people who had come to celebrate and sacrifice at this important Jewish feast. On Sunday, Jesus had entered the holy city to the cheers and shouts of praise that welcomed Him as the “Son of David.” At this point in the week, He had already cleansed the Temple, overturning the tables of the merchants and moneychangers. He had publicly condemned the hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders. He had taught right in the middle of the Temple itself and humiliated the Pharisees and Sadducees on their own turf.

There was nothing subtle or hidden about Jesus during this last week of His life. Jesus had taken the fight straight to His enemies. His identity was no longer masked and, as today’s text opens, we learn that Jesus had just dispensed with the Sadducees, silencing these enemies as they tried to trap Him with a question about the resurrection. And, almost as if they were in the on-deck circle waiting for their turn at bat, Matthew tells us in verse 34 that the Pharisees had gotten “together.” Now, it’s important to understand that this gathering of the Pharisees was no chance meeting. This was a strategic and calculated conspiracy to trap Jesus in His words and, with the crowd looking on, the Pharisees selected their champion: An expert in the law; a Jerusalem lawyer who knew the Scriptures backwards and forwards and was, undoubtedly, the best of best. And his question was intentionally designed to paint Jesus into a corner, leaving Him no choice but to condemn Himself with His answer: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?” (22:36).

The lawyer’s well-crafted question would require Jesus to consider all of the 613 rabbinical laws adhered to by the Pharisees and then to choose one chief law by working through their convoluted and confusing hierarchy of importance based on specific circumstances or situations. In this impossible scenario, if Jesus were to answer the question and choose only one, He would easily contradict and indict himself and the Pharisees would have Him. But instead of focusing on the myriad of laws that consumed the warped minds the Pharisees, Jesus quoted the great “Shema” from Deuteronomy 6 – the creed of ancient Israel still recited twice daily by devout Jews to this day – where Moses proclaimed, “Love the Lord you God with all your heart and with your soul and with all your mind” and then from Leviticus 19 where God tells His people to, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” The Author of the Torah Himself, the very Word in the flesh, Jesus gives His answer without hesitation, quickly and simply. He knows full well that the biggest problem the Pharisees have is twisting the Scriptures to support the theology that man is saved by what he does, by observing *their* laws, and He knows that this faulty premise has corrupted their understanding of the Christ and His identity and work. With this false understanding, it was, in their minds, possible to save themselves, and the Christ – their “savior” – will simply be a man in the line of David who will conquer Israel’s enemies and usher in a new earthly kingdom. But Jesus gives the perfect answer and, in His words, He is laying the foundation for a deeper discussion, one that sees the Christ as the *fulfiller* of the Law and the Savior from *sin* and the very Son of God.

In Mark's Gospel, we are told that the expert in the law who questions Jesus actually declares His answer to be correct and without fault (Mark 12:32–33) and this sends his Pharisee friends into a Pharisee frenzy as gather once again to mount their next assault. I imagine that it almost looked like a football huddle behind the line of scrimmage as these desperate Jewish leaders tried to call their next play...and that's what makes Jesus' next move so shocking. He actually interrupts them! He crosses the line of scrimmage and breaks up their huddle and before they have a chance to question His bold affront – and with crowd watching all of this unfold – Jesus asks *them* a question: “What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?” (Matthew 22:42). The Pharisees were in big trouble. If the people weren't hanging on every word they would've arrested Him on the spot, but now, He had asked them a question about the Messiah, the Christ...right there in the Temple! In the middle of Passover! With the eyes of the Jewish world watching! And they had no choice but to answer: “The son of David.” they said.

Jesus had turned the tables on them and they knew it. As soon the words came out of their mouths, they and everyone in the crowd knew that, in His question about the Christ, Jesus was talking about Himself. When He had arrived in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday the crowds had shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” (Matthew 21:9). When the chief priests and scribes had demanded that He stop the people from calling Him the Christ, Jesus quoted Psalm 8 and told them that God Himself had ordained their praise (Matthew 21:16). But now *Jesus* is calling *Himself* the Son of David! Jesus is revealing Himself as the promised Messiah! And, if that wasn't scandalous enough, what Jesus did next took it to a whole a new level.

He quotes from Psalm 110 and this was a psalm that everyone knew. It was written by King David himself, it was widely understood as a text written about the Messiah and whether you were a Pharisee in Jerusalem or hick from some small, Judean village who happened to be in town for the Passover, you knew this text. Jesus asked, “How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him ‘Lord’? For he says, ‘The Lord said to my Lord: *Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.*’ If then David calls him ‘Lord,’ how can he be his son?” (Matthew 22:43-45). This Scripture, which would have been fully accepted by the Pharisees as a messianic text, declares quite clearly that only God can be David's Lord, and yet King David will have a son, a man, the Christ, whom he will call “Lord,” as revealed *right here* in this portion of the inspired Word of God. And the Pharisees were silent!

By this one question, Jesus has proclaimed to everyone listening, “It's me! I'm the one! I am the man doing the things that only God can do! I am the one who sees your heart and knows your questions and, as you have seen and heard all along, I am the Son of God. I am the Christ!”

They wanted to talk religion, but Jesus forced them to deal with God. *They* wanted to pick apart the law and work out their own righteousness, but Jesus forced them to acknowledge their sinful hearts and lack of love. And He does the same for us as well. Like the Pharisees, we approach religion as our own personal quest for spirituality. *We* like to be the ones asking the questions. *We* like to define the terms of our relationship to God. But the truth is that God doesn't answer to us, we answer to God. And today God asks us, “What do you think about the Christ?” Lewis wrote, “Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else (He was) a madman or something worse.” So...what *do* you think about the Christ?

Today, Jesus Christ has revealed His identity. Today, Jesus Christ, the creator of all that is; the Son of David who was before David; the Son of God who came in the flesh; the Word incarnate; today, this same Jesus Christ comes to us and He calls us not to a self-righteous debate over rules, but to a radical love. And today, in this same Jesus Christ, there is hope – even for sinful-hearted, love-failed sinners like us!

For us, the God-man Jesus Christ humbly submitted to the Father's will. For us, the God-man Jesus Christ perfectly fulfilled God's great command of love, and He did it through the shame of the cross. And all this, Jesus has done *for us*! All this, Jesus has done *for you*...to forgive you...to rescue you...to save you...to give you eternal life! Jesus Christ is God *for you*! Believe and receive the Christ. Amen.

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