



# Central Peninsula Church

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Luke 9:18-27

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## Knowing and Following the Real Jesus

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

To really understand who a person is you have to know their full story, not just a part of their story. A case in point is Abraham Lincoln. He's always been a favorite of mine. If you've been in my office you know that because I have a painting of him hanging on the wall. Many of you, I'm sure, have visited the Lincoln Memorial and seen his glorious effigy sitting high on what appears as a throne. He's surrounded by a reflecting pool containing almost 7 million gallons of water. His marble cast weighs 38,000 tons. He stares straight ahead. It's quite a sight.

But Lincoln can't be understood by looking at the Lincoln Memorial. To really understand him you have to know something of his whole story, especially his suffering and failure. He grew up poor. At a young age his business failed. He fell in love but before he could marry, his sweetheart died. Afterwards he had a nervous breakdown. He experienced many political defeats. He was defeated in his bid for state legislature in 1832. Four years later he was defeated for Speaker of the House, and then in his nomination to Congress. Eleven years later he was defeated for US Senate, and then in his nomination for Vice President, and then again for US Senate before he became President in 1860. After one of his defeats he said, "I feel like a little boy who stubbed his toe. I'm too big to cry but it hurts too bad to laugh." He also suffered great personal loss. His mother died when he was nine. His sister died when he was 19. His second son, Edward, died when he was three. Another son, Tad, died when he was 18. Still another son, William, died at age eleven. All of this on top of his own sense of personal responsibility for a nation that was being torn in two.

To understand a man you have to know the whole story. It's true of Abraham Lincoln and it's true of Jesus Christ. Sometimes we think we know what Jesus was all about, but we don't know the whole story. It's possible to worship a kind of effigy of Jesus, but fail to embrace all that he was and is. If we do that, we might go to church and we might call ourselves Christians, but in the end we might discover that we weren't really his disciples at all.

### I. We must understand who Jesus is (vv. 18-22).

**A. Jesus is the Christ of God:** We last saw Jesus in the area around Bethsaida, on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. We know from Mark's gospel that Jesus and his disciples then traveled north from Galilee to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. But Luke is not so

interested in geography here; he is more interested to locate this event in the prayer life of Jesus.

Look at v.18.

**"And it happened that while He was praying alone, the disciples were with Him, and He questioned them, saying, 'Who do the people say that I am?'"**

Luke wants us to know that the question Jesus will ask his disciples flowed out of his time in prayer with the Father. I would even go so far as to say that the whole direction of Jesus' ministry will now change as a result of prayer. Up until now he's been mainly in Galilee, but soon he will begin his journey to Jerusalem. Starting in 9:51 the whole trajectory of his life and ministry will change; he will be on that road to Jerusalem with no turning back. But it started here, praying alone with his Father. Over and over Luke will remind us that prayer was not just an addendum to his work; it was his work. It wasn't just a crutch to lean on; it was an iron lung without which survival would be impossible. In living his life in that way, he was showing us how to live. Here he shows us that directional changes in our life should be bathed in prayer. Before you make a major change, there should be a sense of conviction that develops in your heart through prayer. Talk to people and get wise counsel, but talk to God and listen to him as he speaks to you through his word and his Spirit.

Now while he prayed the disciples couldn't have been far away because Jesus asks them an important question: "*Who do the people say that I am?*" The disciples are quick to answer.

**"They answered and said, 'John the Baptist, and others say Elijah; but others, that one of the prophets of old has risen again'"** (v. 19).

Like good PR men, they've listened to the buzz of the crowd on numerous occasions. Public opinion seemed to be good lately: "*Some say John the Baptist.*" There was a side to Jesus that was every bit as hard core and "tell it like it is" as John was. "*Others say Elijah.*" It was hard to deny the similarities between these two wonder workers. "*But others say one of the prophets.*" Like modern day Muslims and Hindus, many believed Jesus was a spokesman for God that deserved to be listened to.

I think the disciples were enjoying this discussion. They liked to sit around and banter about the latest fads in religion. But Jesus has had enough armchair theology, and so he asks a far more pointed and

personal question.

**“He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’” (v. 20a).**

In the Greek text the word “you” is placed at the very beginning of the sentence. He says, “YOU, you whom I have chosen and poured my life into, who do you say that I am?” I can just see the disciples begin to squirm. It was time for them to make their own confession of faith. Peter (who else), speaking for the Twelve says.

**“And Peter answered and said, ‘The Christ of God’” (v. 20b).**

The word “Christ” was not Jesus’ last name like “Jones” or “Smith.” The word “Christ” is a formal title, meaning “anointed one,” referring to the long awaited Jewish Messiah. Jesus is the Messiah. The disciples have come to this great discovery of who Jesus is.

Jesus asks each of us that same question, “YOU, who do you say that I am?” It’s not enough to parrot what others are saying; sooner or later we must make our own confession of faith. It’s not enough to enjoy armchair discussions with fellow learners; sooner or later we must enter into our own uncomfortable dialogue WITH HIM. Peter didn’t say, “HE is the Christ,” rather he said “YOU are the Christ.” This was direct address. Some of you still haven’t made that basic discovery. You’ve been sitting in church for weeks, maybe months, but you’re still not there. It’s fascinating to listen and even talk about who this Jesus might be, but what he wants is for you to address him, “YOU are the Christ.”

But even that’s not enough. Peter and the others still had a lot more to learn about this Messiah. That’s why Jesus muzzled him and the others in v. 21.

**“But He warned them and instructed them not to tell this to anyone.”**

You see, Jesus did this because even though their answer was right, their definition of what that meant was all wrong. They believed the Messiah would be a superhuman figure who would overthrow Israel’s enemies, regather God’s people from the four corners of the earth, and make Jerusalem the capital of the world. They’re thinking, “Great, victory and power and authority are right around the corner!” Jesus knew that if that word got out to the Jewish people, chafing under the control of Rome, a revolution would be imminent.

**B. Jesus is the suffering Son of Man:** So in v. 22 Jesus begins to redefine Messiah.

**“...saying, ‘The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed and be raised up on the third day.’”**

Jesus makes an unexpected prediction here about

himself. He calls himself, “The Son of Man,” which came to be Jesus’ favorite way of referring to himself. He predicts what we call his “Passion.” He will suffer, be rejected before the Jewish leaders, and be killed. As almost an afterthought he adds that after three days he will rise again. This is the first of several predictions Jesus would make concerning his death and resurrection on the way to Jerusalem. The cross didn’t take Jesus by surprise. He wasn’t the helpless victim of cruel men. He was fulfilling what he knew to be his chosen destiny. This is why Jesus says he “MUST” suffer. Don’t miss that word. The Son of Man MUST suffer because the Father planned it and the Scripture foretold it and the world needed it.

Patrick Morely writes, “The turning point in our lives is when we stop seeking the God we want and start seeking the God who is.” What kind of Jesus do you want? Do you want an effigy of Jesus or the real thing? Do you want a Jesus who answers every prayer just the way you think he should? Do you want a Jesus who takes away all your problems? Do you want a Jesus who is more Savior than Servant? Do you want a Jesus who is powerful, not weak? We prefer a Jesus who tramples his enemies over one who is trampled on. Sooner or later, we have to stop seeking the Jesus we want and start accepting the Jesus who is; the Jesus of Scripture.

I wonder what the disciples were thinking at this point. I wonder if the disciples implicitly knew that if Jesus MUST suffer that would have implications for their own lives. I think it was dawning on them that the path Jesus took would ultimately determine their own path.

## **II. We must must follow him in a life of costly discipleship (vv. 23-27).**

**A. Costly discipleship means denying self and taking up the cross:** Jesus confirms that in what he says next.

**“And He was saying to them all, ‘If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me’”**

(v. 23).

To understand who Jesus is you have to embrace him as suffering Savior but you also have to follow him on the costly road of discipleship. This is not an unnecessary detour in the life of faith. This is the only way. This is the normal Christian life. This is God’s “must,” not only for Jesus, not only for the disciples, but for us. But what does this call to costly discipleship mean?

Jesus says it means to “*deny yourself.*” Don’t misunderstand this. Denying yourself does not mean denying yourself things. I remember as a kid denying myself bubble gum at Lent and feeling very spiritual about it, but that’s not what Jesus has in mind here. You can deny yourself things and still not deny yourself; you can deny yourself things and be totally self-consumed. Denying yourself may result in denying yourself things, but that’s not

the point. Nor does it mean denying your self worth. Many Christians think that's what Jesus means here, but that's not what he says. He's not calling us to devalue ourselves. And he doesn't mean deny your feelings either. Jesus is not a stern football coach who stands above his team and says, "I don't care how tired you are. Suck it up and run another lap." Denying yourself doesn't mean that you deny yourself happiness either. In some Christian circles godliness is measured by how miserable you feel, but that's not denying yourself. Denying yourself does not mean denying your basic human needs like your need for rest and recreation. We know that because Jesus took time for those things.

So what DOES it mean? To deny yourself means to deny your own right to be master of yourself. It's to say a decisive "no" to your own self lordship. It's to say "no" to the god who is me. You can see that Jesus is striking right at the heart of the matter here because the one thing we value and covet and protect is our right to make ultimate decisions for our lives. But he calls us to give up that right. This will look different for each of us. For the ambitious, it will mean renouncing a life geared towards attaining success as the world defines it. For the greedy, it means refusing to live for things. For the angry, it will mean giving up your desire to get even. For the insecure it will mean giving up your need for human approval. For the adventurous, it will mean giving up your freedom to pick up and go whenever you please. For the witty, it will mean refusing to use your wit to tear others down. For the brilliant, it will mean humbling yourself and learning from those with half the brainpower as you. To live this way we will have to swim upstream in a culture obsessed with self. A culture which defines itself with songs like, "I've Gotta Be Me" and "I Did It My Way" will hardly make this easy for us. A culture which at every turn encourages us to claim our rights and and pamper ourselves and get what we want will have to be resisted.

But there is something else here. Jesus also says costly discipleship means *"taking up your cross daily."* Again, this is misunderstood. We struggle with some illness or with a difficult marriage or an irritating mother-in-law and we say, "This is the cross I have to bear." But that's not what Jesus is getting at here. To take up one's cross evoked repugnant images of a criminal forced to carry a cross beam upon which he would be publicly executed. In Jesus' day, if you saw a man walking down the street carrying that crossbeam, you would know that man was as good as dead. His life had ended. If Jesus were speaking today he would tell us to climb on the table and get ready for a lethal injection. How do we live this way? Certainly, Jesus is calling us to be willing to die for him, but there is more. Jesus is calling us to daily take the position of one who is condemned to death. Jesus is saying discipleship means abandoning our right to control our future; to fulfill our own earthly hopes and ambitions; to control our own destiny. To be dead to this world. To bury all our own agenda and

allow him to either resurrect it or replace it with his own.

That's so foreign to how I live. I still get my feelings hurt if I don't get the recognition I deserve. Someone condemned to die could care less. I still want to plan my future. God loves me and I have a wonderful plan for my life! I've got a church to build. I've got kids to raise. I've got the best years of my life ahead of me. Retirement. Travel. Golf. Long mornings just to read the paper. Jesus says, "From now on, for the rest of your life, you're taking a walk. On your back is the cross beam upon which you will die. I want you to live with reckless abandon for me. I want you to make ME your foremost concern in everything you do. I want you to stand for me and the good news I came to give this world. I want your life to be defined not by your success but by your service to me."

Some of you may say, "Well, that's fine for pastors and missionaries, but that's not how the average Christian lives." Jesus doesn't give us that option. In v.23 Luke says,

*"And he was saying to them all."*

He says that because this was for all of us who want to follow him. This is not just for hero disciples. This is for the average believer. You can't be a Christian without being a disciple. If you just call yourself a Christian, these words are for you.

But we have to make the choice. Notice also the word "if." Jesus says, *"If anyone wishes to come after me..."* Jesus gives us the freedom to choose this costly path. No one can take up our cross for us; no one can make us take it up. On one occasion, Jesus told a wealthy young man that he must sell his possessions. The young man walked off. Jesus loved this man, but he didn't run after him. He let him go. He didn't lower the requirements. In his love he gives us the dangerous freedom to choose whether we will head down this path or not.

**B. Costly discipleship avoided is more costly:** There is good news in this. Look at vv. 24–26.

**"For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it. For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses or forfeits himself? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when He comes in His glory, and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels."**

Jesus gives the rationale for living such a life. It's a well kept secret. The secret is that those who appear to win really lose, and those who appear to lose really win. Like Jesus, those who die really live. Those who give up end up getting so much more. Jesus is saying, "You won't be sorry for making this decision. You may give up the world but you will gain your soul. What is more valuable than that?" You see, Jesus really

does value our lives, and he assumes that we do too. That's why he tells us how to save them. He assumes our soul is more valuable than the whole world. He uses language from the marketplace. He talks about profit. Jesus wants us to profit. He wants us to find true life, but the mystery is that we can't find it by holding on to it. We have to let go. There is a profound mystery in this. We can't find life by grasping it for ourselves. The tighter we try to hold on to our lives and our plans the more they slip through our hands. It's like trying to grasp sand; the tighter you cling the more it just slips through your fingers. I have to tell you this is why most people today are profoundly unhappy. They're clinging to their own lives and coming up empty-handed.

It's important to notice that back in v.24 he promises that we will find our lives when we lose them *for his sake*. That means throwing all that we are and all that we have into him and his Gospel. It means offering him our house, our checkbook, our career, our dreams, our time, our talents. He doesn't just say "lose yourself." A lot of people do that. I think of a woman who loses herself in an affair with a man only to find he never intended to marry her. Or a man who loses himself to get that start up company off the ground only to find himself unemployed when it gets bought out. Jesus doesn't promise that we find our lives by losing them. It's losing our lives FOR HIS SAKE.

Jesus closes his comments by challenging us not be ashamed of him and his words. It's very simple: If you identify yourself with him before men on earth he will identify himself with you before his Father in heaven. Again, he promises not loss but gain. We may be rejected by men, like he was, but we'll be affirmed by him when he comes in glory. Are you ashamed of him? Are you worried about what people will think if they find out you are his follower. We know that there are places where if you confess Christ you can lose your job or your family or even your life. You might just have to lose your reputation. But if there is never a willingness to pay a price, how do we know our discipleship is real?

Jesus concludes his speech by saying something rather strange.

**"But I say to you truthfully, there are some of those standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God"**  
(v. 27).

This is confusing on the surface. What does it mean to "see" the kingdom of God? There have been a number of different proposals as to what Jesus meant by this. If he meant the full coming of his literal

kingdom, he would have been mistaken, because that still hasn't occurred. So what did he mean? I believe he was referring to another event, the Transfiguration, which Luke is about to describe. The Transfiguration was a preview of the kingdom. In 2 Peter 1:16-18, Peter mentions in connection with the Transfiguration the elements of power and the coming of Jesus that are associated with the kingdom. If he was referring to the Transfiguration, then the "some" who would not die before seeing the kingdom were Peter, James, and John, who saw Jesus transfigured. In a sense this is a promise meant to encourage them. "I'm going to give you a little taste of my glorious kingdom just so you know that it's worth everything I am calling you to give up." I think he does that with us as well. We get to "see" the kingdom, too. When the Holy Spirit enters our life, we get a taste of the kingdom. That's why the Spirit is called "the first fruits" of our future inheritance. Even as we deny ourselves, he brings love, joy, peace and power into our lives.

## CONCLUSION

So this passage brings a great challenge before all of us. Most of us are here because we believe in Jesus. We believe he is the Christ of God. We believe he died to save us from our sins and rose again on the third day to give us new life; eternal life. We're thankful for that. But in this passage we see that that's really not all there is to it. There's more to being a Christian than believing in Jesus. You have to follow him in costly discipleship. And sometimes the hardest thing about that is we have so few examples. I believe the biggest deterrent to following Jesus in this way is not the world but the church. If you measure your discipleship by the prevalent Christian culture within the church, your Christian faith will be more about what YOU want than what HE wants. For instance, if you're single, Jesus says I want you to deny yourself and be committed to chastity as a spiritual discipline in your life. Three surveys of Christian singles in the 1990's showed that two-thirds of them were sexually active. In 2003 researchers at the University of Kentucky showed that 61% of students who signed sexual abstinence commitment cards broke their pledges. Who are you going to follow, Jesus or your Christian friends? Here is another example. Jesus says we shouldn't live for material things but generously give to the work of his Kingdom, yet studies of the giving habits of Christians show that most of us don't give much more than about 3% of our income. Who are you going to follow, Jesus or your Christian friends?

It's a good thing to believe in Jesus. Don't stop believing. But don't be fooled either. There is more to it than that. He wants us not just to believe in him but to follow him; to follow him to Jerusalem; to follow him to the cross.

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