

“The Most Important Question in History”

Matthew 16:13-28; Mark 8:27-38; Luke 9:18-27

Series: The Story Chapter 25: Jesus, the Son of God

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Sometimes a student will give an answer on a test which is really good but completely wrong. Here's how one student managed to give the best wrong answer to every question:

Q-1: Where was the Declaration of Independence signed?

A: At the bottom of the page

Q-2: What is the main reason for divorce?

A: Marriage

Q-3: What can you never eat for breakfast?

A: Lunch & dinner

Q-4: If you throw a red stone into the blue sea what will it become?

A: Wet

Q-5: How can a man go eight days without sleeping?

A: He sleeps at night.

Q-6: If you had three apples and four oranges in one hand and four apples and three oranges in other hand, what would you have?

A: Very large hands

Q-7: If it took eight men ten hours to build a wall, how long would it take four men to build it?

A: No time at all, the wall is already built.

Q-8: How can you drop a raw egg onto a concrete floor without cracking it?

A: Any way you want. Concrete floors are very hard to crack.

Q-9: What is the main reason for failure?

A: Exams

Believe it or not, Jesus' students also gave good wrong answers. At the opening of Chapter 25 in *The Story* he asks his disciples, "Who do people say I am?" (Mark 8:27). They supply several opinions they hear from the crowds. "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets" (Mark 8:28). Now those are good answers, but they are dead wrong. Why? Because all the people they mention are dead. Jesus is not some old prophet from the past who climbed up out of a tomb. Even the disciples sense Jesus came not from below but above. But who is He? They aren't sure.

So Jesus forces the issue. "But what about you?" He asked, "Who do you say I am?" (Mark 8:29). While the other students look nervously at one another, Peter steps forward and announces, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). That is the best worst answer of all. Actually, it is the right answer. Jesus even praises Peter saying, "Blessed are

you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 16:17-19). Not bad! Wouldn't it be great if God whispered test answers in your ear?

Immediately after Peter's answer, “Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him” (Mark 8:30). Why? Peter has the right answer...but for the wrong reason. So did many others. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Yet in his mind, Peter probably has a popular misconception of the Messiah. He pictures a warrior hero who drives out their enemies, conquers every nation, and spreads a Jewish empire from sea to shining sea. Jesus is not starting that kind of revolution. He does not need that kind of publicity. That's why He tells His disciples to keep it quiet. In fact, when Jesus describes His true mission, it shatters Peter's imperial dreams. For the first time, the Master reveals His strategy:

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. (Mark 8:31)

Grabbing his Master by the arm, Peter pulls Him aside and says, “Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!” (Matthew 16:22) Jesus' fiery reply sears deep into Peter's soul. With the voice He uses to cast out demons, the Master turns and says to His pupil, “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.” (Mark 8:33) Get out of my way, Satan! You are a temptation, a trap, an obstacle in my path. That's lower story thinking, not upper story. That's your will, not God's will. Right answer. Wrong reason.

One moment Peter is a blessing, the next, a barrier. At first the voice of God speaks through him and then the voice of Satan. Peter stands at the door of heaven with the key in his hand. In the very next instant, he finds himself in the dreadful shadow of the gates of hell. What happened? You can have all the right information about Jesus, and still be terribly wrong. Friends who graduated from seminary in my class went to another school where they studied under a professor who lost his faith while writing his Ph.D. dissertation on the person and work of Jesus Christ. He kept teaching at that seminary. You can be an elder, pastor, or seminary professor, give all the right answers and still be terribly wrong. You can sit in worship services year after year, teach Sunday School or attend Growth Groups and still not know the Lord. And somehow, there are multitudes of people out there who claim to believe in Jesus or in God and yet want nothing to do with His family the Church. Right answer, but all wrong.

The most important question in history is “Who do you say I am?” The way you answer this question will determine how you live in this world and how you will live in the next world. Some in Jesus' day said He was the devil. They opposed Him. Some said He was a rabbi. They ignored Him. Some called Him a prophet. They treated him like the other prophets and didn't do what He said. Some say today He is a good teacher, a religious leader, a great historical figure, a tragic revolutionary. They want to dismiss Him, avoid Him, bury Him. Trouble is: Jesus won't stay dead. He keeps showing up and asking this question: Who do you say I am?

The people who knew Him first-hand ultimately came to one amazing answer: Jesus is God in the flesh. He is fully God and fully human. Nowhere do we see this more clearly than in this chapter of The Story. His divinity shines through in the glory of the Transfiguration, the raising of Lazarus from the dead and His testimony that he existed before Abraham. At the same time, His complete humanity is evident when He rebukes Peter, angrily cleanses the Temple and weeps by the tomb of His dear friend Lazarus. Jews believe in One God who lives in heaven. Greeks, Romans, Indians, Egyptians, Babylonians might believe in a godman. Not Jews. How

then can these good, faithful Jews share the story about a fellow Jew who walks on water, casts out demons, heals diseases, stops the storms, forgives sins and rises from the dead? They met Him. They watched Him. At times they doubted. But ultimately they could not deny it. When He asks, “Who do you say I am?” they have to reply, “You are the Son of the Living God, God the Son, the Great I AM.”

He still asks us: Who do you say I am? In a famous quote C.S. Lewis writes, I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 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 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.

Most important questions don’t just ask for answers. They ask for action. ‘Where are you going to college?’ ‘Will you take the job?’ ‘Will you marry me?’ If you call Jesus your Lord and Savior, that answer requires action. Jesus wants to set Peter and the disciples straight.

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? (Mark 8:34-37)

Jesus gives a three point sermon on what it means to be His disciple: 1. Deny yourself, 2. Take Up Your Cross, 3. Follow Me (by the way, in Greek all three phrases start with the same letter: A – Three points, same letter – this proves Jesus learned to preach at Princeton Seminary).

What does it mean to **Deny Yourself**? It doesn’t mean to deny yourself chocolate, ice cream or television for Lent. In this case, you deny only one thing: yourself. You give up yourself. You give up the right to yourself. You give your life over into God’s hands. In another quote from Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis describes Jesus as saying:

“Give me all of you!!! I don’t want so much of your time, so much of your talents and money, and so much of your work. I want YOU!!! ALL OF YOU!! No half measures will do. I don’t want to only prune a branch here and a branch there; rather I want the whole tree out! Hand it over to me, the whole outfit, all of your desires, all of your wants and wishes and dreams. Turn them ALL over to me, give yourself to me and I will make of you a new self---in my image. Give me yourself and in exchange I will give you Myself. My will, shall become your will. My heart, shall become your heart.”

How do you do that practically? That’s Jesus’ next point: **Death to Your Way**. Jesus says, “Take up your cross.” When someone carries a cross it means one thing: death. Now Jesus doesn’t want you to die. He wants you to put to death your way of doing things. We put to death whatever comes between us and Him, whatever gets in the way of our relationship with Him. In order to gain the Lord, you must make room for Him by losing a few things. You may have to

- Release your control on the people in your life.
- Surrender your right to feel sorry for yourself.

- Let go of the expectations you impose on everyone around you.
- Loosen your grip on some possessions.
- Stop reaching for the next rung on the career ladder.
- Put down the addiction that holds you in its clutches.
- Clear out the guilt, the shame and the resentment stashed up in your soul.
- Admit that you were wrong and ask forgiveness.
- Quit listening to the criticisms in your head that tell you God will never forgive you.

When we begin to put to death our way we start to **Daily Follow His Way**. Jesus says the last step is “daily follow me” (Luke 9:23). It all comes down to this question: Do you have in mind God’s concerns or human concerns? Is it “Thy will” or “My will”? Your way or God’s way? Our culture says, “Grab for everything you can. Try to gain the whole world.” Jesus says, “What good is having the whole world if you’re not around to enjoy it? Let it go, you don’t need it.” People say, “Take charge of your life, be the master of your destiny.” Jesus says, “That’s the best way to lose your life. Give your life to me. I’ll save it for you. I’ll keep it safe.”

Some of you still remember the tiny kitchen in our old Fellowship Hall. Every time our kitchen crew served a meal from this kitchen it was a miracle comparable to the feeding of the five thousand. When, in 2008, we gutted the kitchen to prepare for construction, we took out the cabinets and counter and found a stash of candy: red Swedish fish and lollipops. A mouse worked very hard to save and store up all these goodies. Notice, however, that not one lollipop is unwrapped and all the fish are still there. He gained all this stuff and never got to enjoy it.

Now I’m not against saving or preparing for the future. The problem comes when we keep gathering and collecting and keeping what God gives so we can spend it on ourselves. If you do that you will never have enough. You will always be searching for more. And one day you’ll have to leave your candy stash behind. Jesus tells a parable about a farmer who received a large harvest too big for his barns. Was his solution to share it with others? No.

Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.”’ (Luke 12:18-19)

When God heard this selfish plan He used a four-letter word.

But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God. (Luke 12:20-21)

God blesses us so we can bless our families. Yet God also blesses us so we can bless others. God gives to us so we can give to others and invite others to join the kingdom.

Someone said to me recently, “It must be no fun to do these building campaigns and ask people for money.” It doesn’t bother me at all. Why? First, I’m not asking you to give to me. I’m not asking you to do this for me. That would be selfish. We are doing this for the Lord. Second, I don’t mind asking people to give because I know disciples of Jesus want to give. They enjoy giving. They love to bless others. They live to bless others. If you don’t love to bless others with your financial gifts along with your time and spiritual gifts you need to ask yourself, “What’s wrong with my relationship with Jesus?” Jesus is at heart a giver. “For God so loved the world that He gave...” (John 3:16). If you want to be like Jesus, you will become a joyful giver. Third, the reason I love doing this is I see the difference your generous gifts make in the life stories of people who pass through this building: homeless and hungry neighbors, people struggling in

their marriage and job, those wrestling with grief, addiction, and depression, children, youth and adults hungering for God's Word and a new life. In this place God is writing new life stories.

LENA?

Please pray about what you will commit on October 25th to Share the Story over the next three years. God blesses each one of us so we can be a blessing.

Every day is precious. Every day of life is a gift from God. That's why we must daily follow Jesus and daily ask, "What is your will? Your will be done in my life today." All of us know when our first day on earth is. I celebrated mine this past week. Yet none of us know when our last day will be. This week I heard about five people who came to their last day rather suddenly: Austin, Claude, Clay, Don, and Larry. I participated in funerals for two of them. While I prepared to lead one of those funerals I received an email from the Presbytery that a fellow Presbyterian pastor Don went to a movie last Monday to celebrate his birthday and when the movie was over he so was his time here on earth. I was saddened by each loss. Yet I know, if we follow Jesus, His way leads to life. Jesus says there is nothing you can give in exchange for your life. No achievements, accomplishments or assets can buy your way into eternity. But, praise God, you don't have to. Jesus paid the price. Jesus opened the Way. Jesus is the Way. That's why we must daily follow His Way.

One of those who left us recently and suddenly was Austin Michael White. I did not know him personally but we at Woodside joined many others who prayed for him. Austin is the son of Derek and Carolyn who is a teacher at Quarry Hill School. He was planning a career move from Boston to Florida and was engaged to marry his fiancée Paula in 2016. Unexpectedly his heart developed problems. There were several critical surgeries but they could not save him. He was 27. His father Derek said,

Austin was a charming, colorful personality that had friends around the world. He loved the English Premier Soccer League, cooking/food, Salsa dancing, and travel. He was a Christian believer that had a big and generous heart.

His mother Carolyn wrote these incredible words which she gave me permission to share. They are a testimony of how they daily followed Jesus through this terribly painful loss.

Faith has been the anchor of our family. We have always trusted in the truth of God's word. We know God promises to meet us in the midst of anxiety, confusion, disillusionment, heartbreak, disappointment and all the vicissitudes of life. We have clung to the Scriptures, believed in their truth and trusted the promise of peace despite unimaginable circumstances. We prayed and trusted peace would come. We prayed and trusted that even though we were out of resources and utterly overwhelmed by circumstances, that God promised to be present. He promised to heal the raw edges of our splintered souls and mend our brokenness. We yearned for the peace that passes understanding, but knew we couldn't control it, and we couldn't bring it about. In fact we didn't find peace---It found us --often surprising us when it arrived, when our world was crushing in around us and when our emotions seemed most fatigued and our hearts seemed most fragile. Peace however came at unsuspecting times and caught us off guard in the midst of life changing decisions, in moments of panic, and in the midst of clamor and medical chaos- it would come --a sense of peace that would well up in our hearts and overtake us completely. Peace, so simple yet love all consuming.

We know with unwavering belief that our God is faithful and utterly dependable. We have been able to rejoice daily in the little miracles we have seen and to see the love of

Christ poured out upon us. Thank you all for your ongoing prayers, love and support. We know God is sovereign. In this we continue to trust!

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When you got through the test and trials and troubles of life, follow Jesus. Hold on to Jesus. He is the answer.