

WHAT WILL PEOPLE THINK?

Matthew 16:13-20

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What will people think?

My grandparents lived in a small town in southern Indiana, and that question haunted their every decision and action. My siblings and I were allowed to walk two blocks down the street to buy a Popsicle, but Grandma would inspect us before we went, just to make sure we were presentable in case someone saw us and identified us as her grandchildren.

What will people think?

Politicians call them focus groups: groups of people selected because they supposedly represent a cross-section of Americans. The politician says a number of things, asks the focus group for its reaction, and then reshapes the message to get the desired response.

Computer technology has even made it possible to measure the response of the audience and reshape the message as it is being spoken.

But when Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” he’s not using them as a focus group, and he’s not going to reshape his message depending on their response—or on what people might say. He asks, not because he wants to see whether he’s getting it right, but to see whether they are.

And he’s still asking that question of us. Who do we say that he is?

WHAT PEOPLE SAID

Just last week, in Matthew 15:10–20, Jesus reminded us that it is not what goes into our mouths that defiles us, but what comes out. He names several things that come out of people’s mouths—bad things that degrade us—and among them are slander and bearing false witness.

We are all well aware, sometimes painfully, that the things we say to others or about others can do great good. They can also do much terrible harm.

In 1894, Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a quiet, capable Jewish officer in the French army, was summoned before his superiors and accused of betraying France. The evidence was flimsy—a scrap of handwriting that only vaguely resembled his. But suspicion, prejudice, and the eagerness to find a culprit carried the day. Dreyfus was publicly stripped of his rank, his sword broken in front of the crowd, and he was shipped off to the desolate prison on Devil’s Island where he spent four years and seven months – 1,517 days – his entire sentence in solitary confinement.

In time, courageous voices condemned the prejudice and malfeasance that had convicted Dreyfus. The famous writer Émile Zola wrote and published *J’accuse*, which helped prove that

Dreyfus had been innocent all along. The real traitor had been someone else entirely. But the damage was done. A man's reputation had been shattered, his family humiliated, his nation divided for years—all because people were willing to believe and repeat what was false.

Bearing false witness is never a small thing. A rumor, a careless accusation, a whispered suspicion can take on a life of its own. It can ruin a career, break a family, or fracture a community. Scripture's command not to bear false witness is not just about courtroom truth; it is about protecting the dignity of our neighbor. When we damage another with our words, Jesus reminds us, we damage ourselves as well.

On the other hand, the things that come out of our mouths can do great good.

When Fred was a young seminary student, he wasn't sure he belonged in the ministry. He felt awkward, uncertain, and painfully aware of his own shortcomings. One afternoon, after watching a children's television program, he confessed to a professor that he felt drawn to the medium—but also deeply inadequate. He said something like, "I don't think I have what it takes to make a difference."

The professor didn't argue with him. He didn't give him a lecture. He didn't hand him a book, and he didn't list his strengths. He simply said: "Fred, I see something in you. I think you can do this. And I think you're supposed to do this."

That one sentence—spoken with sincerity and confidence—landed in Fred Rogers' heart like a seed. He later said it was the moment he realized that encouragement is a form of grace, and that grace can redirect a life.

He followed that nudge. He stepped into television. And millions of children—and adults—were shaped by his presence on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, where he daily demonstrated his gentle wisdom, his simple kindness, and his unwavering belief that every person is loved and capable of loving.

All because one professor took ten seconds to speak a word of encouragement.

WHAT DO WE SAY?

Today, Jesus asks us the same two questions he asked of his disciples: "Who do people say that I am?" and "Who do you say that I am?"

Theologians and preachers call this Christology—that is, the study of how we talk about Jesus. And, as is usually the case, how we talk about someone else often tells us more about us than it does about them. So, let's look at the first question: Who do people say that Jesus is? And let's see what it tells us about Jesus, and about us.

Most people have a fairly good opinion of Jesus, even if they think he didn't really exist. Yes, there are those who believe that since, after 2,000 years, there is no physical evidence of his existence—no DNA to trace back—he was just a figment of the imaginations of the Gospel writers: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

We're not going to deal with that this morning. We're going to assume that Jesus was a real person, that the historic traditions and the witness of the Gospel writers are reliable at least on that score, and move on from there.

So, what else do people say about Jesus?

Nearly all people agree that Jesus—real or imagined—was a great Jewish rabbi: a moral teacher, philosopher, and theologian. He was an ethicist and the leader of a short-lived reform movement within first-century Judaism. He was the person upon whose life and teachings Christianity was founded.

Many accept that he possessed a gift for healing. Some try to explain it; others just accept that it was so and move on.

He was born in Bethlehem, raised in Nazareth, trained as a carpenter or woodworker, educated in the synagogue school, and baptized by John the Baptizer around the time of his thirtieth year. He led a brief reform movement that threatened the religious and political powers in Judea, was arrested on trumped-up charges, tried, found guilty of treason, and executed by order of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate.

That, as the scholars say, is pretty much all we know about the historical man named, in Greek, Jesus; in Hebrew, Yeshua ben Joseph.

But what if we go beyond the historical Jesus? What do we say about Jesus who was, as we Christians confess, the Christ—that is, the savior, the Messiah?

People in the Evangelical and Fundamentalist branch of the Christian family would put what they have to say about Jesus into a short, concise, familiar phrase: ***Jesus is my personal Lord and Savior.*** Let's break that down.

First, "personal" – Jesus relates to them individually and personally—directly, without the need for an intermediary.

Second, "Savior" – Human beings are essentially sinful and deserving of God's wrath and punishment, but Jesus took their sins upon himself and paid the price for those sins by dying on the cross, freeing them from an eternity in Hell and giving them the promise of an eternal life in Heaven after they die.

Third, "Lord" – Therefore, Jesus is their master, the one who commands their loyalty and devotion without which they will suffer eternal torment.

That's an oversimplification. Books have been written about that understanding of who Jesus is. But I think this oversimplification is the one most Evangelical and Fundamentalist Christians themselves use when they say, "I accept Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior," so it is helpful.

The other popular understanding of who Jesus is usually referred to as the Liberal Mainline Christian understanding. It was first articulated in the late 1800s by such prominent preacher-theologians as Henry Ward Beecher and became popular shortly after the turn of the twentieth century, especially in the Episcopal, Presbyterian, Congregational, and Methodist denominations, as well as some others.

Mainline Christians tend to emphasize Jesus as the revelation of God's love, justice, and way of life. We are less focused on substitutionary atonement—that Jesus died to atone for our sins—and more on ethical transformation and social healing. Because Jesus was the total and authentic revelation of God's love, and because he lived and died to demonstrate God's love, we who take his name, Christian, are called to follow him and live as he lived.

We agree with our Evangelical brothers and sisters that Jesus is our Savior, but not because God demanded that someone had to die for the sins of humankind and Jesus fit the bill. Rather, we believe he is our Savior because he died to show us the authentic life that God has, by his grace, provided for us.

Therefore, we live according to his teachings: to love one another, to love our neighbor, to feed the hungry, visit the sick, welcome the stranger, care for the poor, and practice all the other ways human beings are able to humbly share God's love with others.

BECAUSE WE'RE CHRISTIANS

When I was growing up, my parents had a set of rules they pounded into our heads—sometimes gently and lovingly, and sometimes, well, not so much. But they were all good rules. Rules about being a good person: honest, kind, generous, gentle, polite, respectful. Those kinds of things.

Often, we didn't understand why those things were necessary. Why, for instance, did I have to say "yes, sir" and "no, sir" to old Mr. Halliburton, who lived next door? Why did we have to tell the waitress when she left Lisa's hamburger off the meal check? Why did I have to mow Miss Dorothy's yard for free when she was in the hospital? Why did Dad always "forget his hat" and have to go back into the restaurant where he would add money to the miniscule tip my grandfather left the waitress?

Their answer was often the same: Because we're Feldmeyers and that's the kind of people Feldmeyers are.

Why do we have to go to church every Sunday, Dad? Because we're Feldmeyers and Feldmeyers go to church.

Why do we have to bake cookies for the bake sale, Mom? Because we're Feldmeyers and Feldmeyers always donate my special sugar cookies to the bake sale.

When I got older, in high school, I'm not gonna lie I was one of the popular kids. I could sit with the popular kids in the cafeteria if I chose to. But more often than not, I sat with the new kids who didn't know anyone, or the unpopular kids, the nerdy kids, the special ed kids, the

awkward kids. And when for whatever reason I couldn't sit with them, I at least greeted them by name as I walked by.

One day Janet, the girl I was dating, said to me, "You're always nice to everyone, aren't you?"

"Yeah," I said. "I try to be. Why?"

"You know the jocks and the Barbies laugh at you when you do that, right?"

"Yeah," I said. "I know."

"But you don't care. You do it anyway. Why?"

I thought for a moment about the time I was the new kid and no one sat with me. About the times I was laughed at and made fun of because I was clumsy and awkward. About the times I was picked on or simply ignored. And then I said, "I guess it's because I'm a Feldmeyer, and that's just what Feldmeyers do."

Today, I would add, "And because I'm a Christian and that's what Jesus did."

AMEN