

Identity and Invitation

Mark 8:27-9:29

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Who are you? How do you typically answer that question? This question has been asked for hundreds, if not thousands of years. It's a question of identity but it goes deeper to the very heart of what it means to be human. Why was I created? What is my purpose in this world? Is there meaning to my life?

Sociologists often break this question into three sub-points to try to define who we are.

They suggest our identity is based on:

1. What I do (performance)
2. What others think of me (popularity)
3. What I have (possessions)

Unfortunately our society has bought into these definitions and our whole advertising industry and social media are built around these three things. But does my performance, popularity or possessions define who I am as a person or is there something else we have been invited into? I've titled this teaching, Identity and Invitation.

Pastor Rob has been leading you on a journey through the gospel of Mark by asking the question, Who is this man Jesus? This is, of course, a question of identity. And Mark lays out the answer in the very first verse. "*The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*" There are two parts to this introduction. Jesus as the Christ, which means Messiah or anointed one. And Son of God, meaning the third part of the trinity, the triune Godhead. In short, Mark is introducing the reader to Jesus as both human and divine. In the next 16 chapters, he lays out his proof by telling story after story of what Jesus does to verify his identity.

Before we jump into our passage for this morning, we need to understand what has happened to this point in Mark's telling of the story of Jesus. This question of Jesus' identity really begins in Mark 6:14-29 with the story of Herod and the beheading of John the Baptist.

Read Mark 6:14-15. Do you see Herod's questioning of Jesus' identity? Pilate will ask a similar question of identity at Jesus' trial. "Are you the king of the Jews?" (Mark 15:2). We should not be surprised at this type of questioning, and I think Mark understands the importance of addressing this issue.

Mark is a masterful storyteller, and he unpacks the question of Jesus' identity in chapters 6:30 to 8:26 with ten incredible stories that set up the passage we will be looking at today. The first is the feeding of the 5,000 and the final one is the healing of the blind man where Jesus does so in two parts.

We need to ask, What are these ten stories intended to teach us? The answer? They are designed to point the reader towards Jesus' identity as the Messiah and Son of God. Mark does this by showing how the disciples were moving from having hard hearts and lack of understanding regarding Jesus' identity towards soft hearts and a deeper understanding of who Jesus is. It's a beautiful picture of their growth and confidence in accepting who Jesus is. It should serve as an encouragement to us in our daily discipleship with Jesus. This now sets us up for the first section of our passage this morning.

Read Mark 8:27-30.

Did you catch the question? Who do people say that I am? It's a question of identity. Do you think Jesus was having an identity crisis? Absolutely not! He knew exactly who he was and why he came to earth. Remember the three things society uses to define identity? Performance, popularity and possessions. Well guess what? Jesus had already settled these for himself. Turn back to Matthew 4. This is the record of Jesus' temptation by the devil in the desert. Look at this:

Temptation #1 – turn stones to bread (I am what I do...performance).

Temptation #2 – throw yourself off the temple and angels will protect you (I am what others think...popularity).

Temptations #3 – worship the devil and all the kingdoms will be yours (I am what I have...possessions).

Jesus did not fall into the trap of finding false identity in these lies. His identity was secure. We can take great comfort in knowing that just as Jesus overcame these temptations, so we too can stand strong when the world is telling us to look elsewhere for our identity. Our identity is found in our relationship with Jesus as Saviour and in the love of our heavenly Father.

So back to Mark. He knew Jesus knew who he was and so he cleverly positions this section exactly where it needs to be. Where? In the very centre of his gospel record and he does so with Peter's resounding declaration, "You are the Christ!" How about that for an identity statement!

Today is Palm Sunday, the Sunday before Easter. It's the day we remember Jesus' entry into Jerusalem more than 2000 years ago riding on a donkey to the shouts of Hosanna and praise from the crowd, many who are waving palm branches and throwing their cloaks on the road in front of him. And then just a few days later another crowd shouting "crucify him!" Have you ever thought that this is also an identity story? As he entered Jerusalem, Jesus knew the crowd saw his identity as the conquering Messiah who would overthrow the Roman oppression. But he understood his identity and purpose in the Father's bigger plan for the salvation of the world. Nothing was going to sway him from fulfilling his identity and calling.

Now back to Peter's statement. No sooner has he made his remarkable declaration than he reveals he still lacks a full understanding of Jesus' identity and calling.

Read Mark 8:31-33.

Before we are too hard on Peter, do you see what caused him to pull Jesus aside and rebuke him? What had Jesus just told them was going to happen? His death and resurrection! Peter's response is impulsive, but it also reveals where his heart is. He is still viewing Jesus' identity and calling from a "build an earthly kingdom" perspective, not from a spiritual one which is why Jesus tells *him* "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." This, by the way, is the first of three predictions Jesus makes of his impending death and resurrection and each time the disciples don't get it!

So what does Jesus do? He turns to the crowd and calls them into the conversation. This is an important point in the way Mark is telling the story because what follows is Jesus' invitation not just to his disciples, but to all who would choose to follow him in a life of discipleship.

Read Mark 8:34-9:1

If Mark intentionally places Peter's declaration of Jesus as "the Christ" at the centre of his gospel letter, then he also deliberately places Jesus' invitation to a life of discipleship in the centre as well. Most scholars agree that these verses we just read form the heart and soul of the requirements needed to become a true disciple of Jesus. What are they? There are three. Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow.

1. Deny yourself. What does it mean to deny yourself? It does not mean denial of things or comforts, but a denial of self...who I am. Do you see how this is tied so closely with the question of our identity? The big difference between what the world tells us about identity and what Jesus says is my true identity is found in a relationship with Jesus himself and not in what I do, what others think, or what I have.

To deny oneself literally means we give up our selfish inner tendencies (Neufeld, Teaching Stones to Love:162). I like how C.S. Lewis puts it. "Humility [self denial] is not thinking less of yourself but thinking of yourself less." This frees us to joyfully serve others ahead of ourselves. It's what Jesus modeled during his life on earth. "*The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many*" (Mark 10:45). How are you doing with denying yourself? Have you chosen to submit your will and desires to the will and desires of Jesus? This is why Jesus uses the imagery of cross.

2. Take up your cross. We all know the gruesomeness of the Roman cross of crucifixion, especially as we head into Easter. So why did Jesus use this word as a requirement for being his disciple? Well, the Romans had mastered this method of punishment and almost made it a science. Part of the crucifixion ritual involved the criminals carrying their own crossbeam on their shoulders. Why? Because it forced their head forward and down, showing their submission to Rome.

Jesus used this word “cross” deliberately to indicate that the cost of discipleship would require submission to his will, just as he himself submitted to his Father’s will. This concept of the cross is picked up by the apostle Paul who writes, *“Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires”* (Galatians 5:24). What does this mean? The flesh that must be crucified is our sinful, fallen human nature. It is anything that wants to control us and lead us away from a fruitful life of following Jesus.

But here’s the good news according to Paul in Galatians 2:20. *“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”* When we come to Jesus and confess our sin (our selfish desires) and invite him to take over the leadership of our lives we crucify our flesh. Is crucifying our flesh a one-time event? Absolutely not! It requires a daily surrendering of our will to his will. Here’s an important point. The receiving of his free gift of salvation is a one-time event, but the surrendering of our will to his will must happen daily.

There is one more requirement. We are then called to follow Jesus. This is the invitation Jesus gave to each of his first disciples, it is the call he gave here to the crowd, and it is the same invitation he extends to each of us.

3. Follow me. To follow Jesus means just that. Follow! Or as John Mark Comer says in his excellent book, *Practicing the Way*, “be with Jesus, be like Jesus, and do the things he did.” Follow me is often considered the “easiest” of the three requirements Jesus lists here, but it really is not. Consider the disciples. Initially they simply followed and watched. They were with Jesus. Then they begin to preach and heal, and Jesus put them into increasingly challenging situations. They were becoming like Jesus. But eventually he calls them to imitate him in everything he did. They began to do the things Jesus did with a heart of servanthood.

We are given this same invitation to follow. Where are you in this process? Do you desire to be with Jesus? If so, are you making a daily effort to spend time with him? When people watch you, do they say, “there’s a person who is becoming more like Jesus” or do they cringe at your behaviour? Are you discovering more about what it means to do the things Jesus did? And if so, are you actually doing them? We need to remember discipleship is a process as Paul states in Philippians 1:6. *“Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion.”* Don’t give up!

Before we move on, we need to comment on Mark 8:35 where Jesus clarifies what these three requirements involve. He does so by using contrasting language.

“Whoever wants to save their life will lose it.”

“Whoever loses their life will save it.”

What does this mean? Well, it’s another part of the invitation to deny yourself but it can be confusing because the Greek word here for “life” can also be translated as “soul.”

Many commentators have suggested this concept of losing one's life (or soul) is a reference to martyrdom. But is that what Jesus is calling us to? It is a known fact that more Christians have been killed for their faith in the 20th century than all previous centuries combined. But if this is the call for all of us, that would not leave any Christians alive to spread the gospel. So what does Jesus mean?

The clue is found in the translation of the word "life" or "soul". In the Greek language at this time there were four words used for "life." The most common is zoe, from which we get the word zoology. But the word Jesus uses here is psuche. This is where we get the word psychology from. This word refers to our inner life or self, our feelings, dreams or aspirations (Neufeld:163). Jesus is calling us to lay down our psuche (our self, our desires, our dreams, yes, our very identity) and surrender them to his will. It's exactly what we just talked about in taking up our cross.

So the big question is, Will it be our way or the way of the cross? (Neufeld:165). This concept of surrender flies in the face of a society that screams, do it your way or be true to yourself or you've got what it takes. That is not the way of Jesus. Jesus' way involves total self-denial and surrendering to his will for our life. As we let go of our self we begin to discover the true meaning of the abundant life. We find our true joy, and purpose in a deep abiding relationship with the living God!

Wow, this has been a lot to digest. Don't worry, the rest of this teaching will be very brief. As I looked at the next sections I had to ask, what in the world do these have to do with the previous sections? What is Mark up to? Let's see if we can figure it out.

Read Mark 9:2-13

What's going on in this section? Well remember our title? Identity and Invitation. Notice what Mark records in verse 7. *"This is my Son, whom I love, listen to him."* There is the connection back to the identity issue. God is affirming Jesus as his very own Son, whom he dearly loves. This is the second time God the Father has affirmed Jesus. Can you recall where the first took place? At Jesus' baptism when the heavens opened and the Spirit in the form of a dove descended on Jesus and a voice from heaven said, *"You are my Son whom I love; with you I am well pleased"* (Mark 1:11).

This is no small thing! The fact that God affirms Jesus' identity twice is significant because it points to the importance of Jesus knowing who he was. How many of us have longed for the affirmation of our identity from a parent or someone we look up to? Psychologists tell us that children who don't hear the words "I love you" from a parent are more likely to struggle with developing healthy self-esteem, trust, and emotional stability, potentially leading to mental health issues and relationship problems later in life.

Jesus had no such problems. Maybe that's why Mark recorded these words from some religious leaders. *"They came to him [Jesus] and said, 'Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth'"* (Mark 12:14).

Are you struggling with your identity as a child of God? Hear these words from John 1:12. *"Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."* If you have a growing relationship with Jesus, this is what defines who you are. You are God's child, and he reaches out to you with deep compassion and loving-kindness! If you haven't responded to his invitation to follow, what is holding you back? Why not repent today. If you have, hold onto the truth of who you are!

Read Mark 9:14-29

This is another lengthy story. Why does Mark place it here in his writing? I wrestled with this until I realized there is a connection to the identity and invitation theme. Did you notice the honesty of the boy's father? *"If you can do anything, take pity on us."* He thinks he believes Jesus can heal his son but there is that hint of doubt in the "if." As soon as Jesus challenges his thinking, he is quick to state that famous line many of us have quoted, *"I do believe, help my unbelief."* He believed to a point, but it took Jesus' rebuke to get him to see he needed to deny himself and trust Jesus to do the miracle.

Mark is pointing out that the disciples are not much further along in their faith than this man. Remember earlier, Jesus has empowered his disciples to be able to cast out demons and heal, so why did they fail in this story? Could it be that they were trying in their own strength rather than relying on the power of God? I think that's why Jesus said, *"This kind can only come out by prayer."* Too many times in my life I have relied on myself to fix something rather than trusting the power of God. So here we are, right back to the issue of self-denial. In order to let God have control and accomplish his will, I need to let go of my control and my will. It's the only way it works. What are you holding onto this morning? Are you willing to let it go?

Well that was a bit of a whirlwind through a lot of verses! I skipped over a lot of detail, but I hope you are encouraged by our theme of identity and invitation. I want to leave you with a practical illustration that I hope will stay with you in the coming weeks and further guide you in your understanding of this whole matter of identity and invitation.

In their book, Lead Like Jesus, Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges use the little word EGO to describe the choice we have when it comes to self-denial. They suggest we can either **Edge God Out** or **Exalt God Only**. Clever!

To Edge God Out means we allow our pride and self-sufficiency to dictate how we live our lives. It's the opposite of what Jesus invites us as his followers to experience. To live this way leads to separation from the love of God because it distorts the truth and fools us into a false sense of security. Over time we come to believe we are in charge, that we can control the outcome of our lives. Guess what! It usually does not end well!

To Exalt God Only is to make him the object of our worship and the source of our security and self-worth. It requires humility and submission to what he wants for our lives. It means relinquishing our desires for his desires. Or, to use Jesus' own words, we respond to his invitation to "take up our cross and follow him." This requires a willing heart of obedience to his call on our lives.

For many of you much of this teaching is "old news". That can be dangerous. As the old saying goes, "familiarity breeds contempt." So let me challenge all of us with this call to obedience. What will you do with the words you have heard from Jesus? Which EGO will you choose?

As I thought about this for myself, I was reminded of the familiar story Jesus told at the end of the Sermon on the Mount with the wise and foolish builders. This is not a contrast between a believer and a non-believer. This is a contrast of a believer who obeys Jesus' words and commands and one who doesn't. This is another teaching by Jesus about identity and invitation. Let me suggest the foundations in this story represent where we find our identity. We either get them from Jesus and his word or we get them from ourselves and the world we live in.

Listen to what Jesus says. *"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash"* (Matthew 7:24-27).

What is your foundation built on? May God by his Holy Spirit give you a soft and willing heart to obey Jesus' call to follow him.

Reflection Questions:

Identity: Who do you say Jesus is? What does he mean to you personally? Where are you looking for your identity? For some encouragement read and meditate on Ephesians 1:3-14.

Invitation: Have you counted the cost of following Jesus? What does that look like in your life? Have you considered the cost of not following?