

Who do You Think I am?

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[0 : 00] Good afternoon everyone. I repeat Graham's welcome. Delighted to have everyone here today. I should perhaps begin with an apology to those who are coming looking forward to hearing Paul Johnson this morning.

I messed up my diary so Paul and I have swapped. You can look forward now to hearing Paul next Sunday morning. I wanted to begin as we come to the end of the first major section of Luke's Gospel by saying how much I've enjoyed reading through Luke over the last few weeks.

I've enjoyed it of course because it's the greatest story ever told. It's the words and the deeds of the Lord Jesus and how wonderful they are. But I've enjoyed it also because it's just so well written.

I might say of course it's well written. It's the Bible. It's God's inspired word. It's bound to be well written. And yes, that's true. But there's something about the way that Luke writes that I find particularly helpful and particularly attractive.

And I think it comes down to what's written on the back of this little book. This little book is actually just the Gospel of Luke. There are lots of copies on the front table.

[1 : 05] If you've not got a Bible or if you just want to read Luke by itself, then please take it away. But on the back of the book it has something that comes right from the beginning of Luke's Gospel where he says, Since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you.

And it's that word orderly that I think is really helpful when we come to look at Luke's Gospel. Orderly doesn't just mean it was in chronological order. Jesus did this, then he did that, then he did something else.

Rather, what Luke has done, he has taken all the evidence he could find about the Lord Jesus. He's spoken to people who travelled around with Jesus. He's probably read Mark's Gospel and perhaps other writings about Jesus as well.

And he's gathered everything together and he's put it down in an orderly, in a structured fashion. And there are two particular things about the passage this morning which I think highlight how Luke has put things down in an orderly fashion and how it can be helpful to us when we understand that.

The first is right at the beginning of the passage in verse 18 when it says, Once when Jesus was praying in private. Once when Jesus was praying in private.

[2 : 23] Luke tells us more about the prayers of the Lord Jesus than any of the other Gospel writers. Time and again as we read through Luke, we find them presenting to us Jesus at prayer.

And what's significant every time we see Jesus at prayer in Luke, is it's a sign that something very important is about to happen. Luke is almost signposting through his Gospel, taking what was undoubtedly the daily habit of the Lord Jesus, of praying to his Father, but highlighting at particular times that before something happened, Jesus prayed.

So at his baptism, Jesus prayed and the Holy Spirit descended on him and then he went into the desert to be tempted by the devil. The night before he chose his twelve disciples, Jesus spent praying.

He went up a mountain to pray and he was transfigured before his disciples. He went to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night he was betrayed and before his trial and crucifixion.

If you see Luke recording that Jesus is praying, I think that is in one sense Luke saying to us, pay particular attention to what's about to come.

[3 : 36] It's very important that you understand it. And that's certainly true of the passage that we've got today. This is a core passage in Luke's Gospel. Jesus is coming to the end of the first major part of his ministry when he's been traveling down Galilee from chapter 10 and Luke onwards.

He'll be in the long journey towards Jerusalem. He's coming to the end of the first part of his earthly ministry. And Luke chapter 9 pulls together a number of things about that climax.

And in this passage, Jesus is answering three very simple questions. My version of them is slightly different from what Peter said earlier, but essentially the same thing. Jesus in this passage presents to us three things.

The first is who he is. The second is why he came. And the third is what he requires of us. Who he is, why he came, and what he requires of us.

And Luke highlights that this is really important by mentioning Jesus' prayer at the beginning. The second kind of structural thing in Luke that I think is really helpful as we look at this passage is to realize that when Luke puts two things together or just a little bit apart, there's some significance in that.

[4 : 54] So, for example, in our passage today, if you were here last week, you may remember if you read through the chapter by yourself, you would undoubtedly notice. Early on, Jesus asked disciples who the crowd say I am, and they said, well, some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, one of the prophets.

Now, we've just gone back a few verses in Luke chapter 9. Exactly the same thing was said about Jesus then. In that case, it was Herod as Herod, the same kind of thing. John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets.

And so the two things close together, Luke is emphasizing the importance of this question, who is Jesus? And what's important, too, is what's in the middle.

We looked at it last Sunday, and what's in between Herod talking about who Jesus is and Peter talking about who Jesus is is the story of the feeding of the 5,000.

Now, if we went to Matthew or to Mark, between the feeding of the 5,000 and this discussion with the disciples at Caesarea Philippi, there's about a chapter and a half of other things that Jesus said and did.

[6 : 02] The two aren't close together. Chronologically, they didn't just follow exactly one after the other. But Luke, I think, is saying to us that the feeding of the 5,000 is significant in the understanding of the people of whom Jesus is and also in the understanding of his disciples.

The people think that Jesus is someone special. They say, well, he looks like one of the great prophets. He could be Elijah. Elijah, the great prophet from the Old Testament, the one who did so many miracles, who stood up to Ahab and Jezebel and to comprehensively prove that their Baal worship was wrong.

So people are saying, this is a wonderful person before us. Maybe it's Elijah. Or more recently, John the Baptist had been beheaded by Herod. Maybe people are saying, well, maybe this is John the Baptist come back, almost as a judgment for Herod.

The great things he's doing would be fitting, not that John did lots of miracles, but would be fitting with the kind of message that John brought. Or perhaps he's another of the great prophets from the Old Testament.

And I'm quite sure that the feeding of the 5,000 would confirm the people in their understanding that Jesus was someone very special. This wasn't just an ordinary preacher.

[7 : 19] It wasn't even just an ordinary prophet. He was comparable with the greatest of them. And the feeding of 5,000 undoubtedly would fuel them in that thinking.

And if we read other Gospels, feeding of 5,000, the people wanted to make Jesus their king at that point. But Jesus wants to get beyond that with his disciples.

Yes, the people have realized that Jesus is someone really special. But have the disciples realized just how special Jesus is?

Now again, the feeding of the 5,000, the large part of that is a dialogue between Jesus and the disciples and their amazement that with five loaves and two fish, he could feed that great multitude.

And so Jesus asked Peter the question, who do you say that I am? And Peter on behalf of all the disciples says, some say John, Peter on behalf of all the disciples says, for us, you are God's Messiah.

[8 : 23] Or you are God's Christ. And that goes well beyond what the people were saying. The people were saying, here's someone pretty special. He's comparable with Elijah, with John the Baptist, or with the other great prophets that we know about in the Old Testament.

Peter on behalf of the disciples says, you're more than that, Lord. You're more than just one of the greats of history. You are the Messiah. You are the Christ who has been promised by God.

Now in our day, we tend to use the word Christ almost as a surname for Jesus. We talk about Jesus Christ, sometimes Christ Jesus. But of course, if we understand the Jewish history and the Old Testament at all, then the Christ, the Messiah, was someone who had been promised, who would be absolutely unique, who would be God's ultimate messenger to the world, who would be the one ultimately who would bring freedom to God's people.

And in saying that Jesus was the Christ, or Jesus was the Messiah, Peter was recognizing just how special, how important he was. We return a bit in the chapter, and you look at it next week with Paul, and we then get Jesus presented as the Son of God, takes us a bit further forward.

Again, two instances next to each other, one Luke presents Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, and then with the voice from heaven, the next one, he presents him as the Son of God.

[9 : 53] But here, Peter very clearly realizes Jesus isn't just a good man. He's not even just a great prophet. He is God's promised Messiah. He is the one and only whom God has sent into the world.

I guess for us, that is the starting point, isn't it, as we come to think about what it means to follow Jesus, and to be part of his kingdom. We first have to recognize he is absolutely unique.

He's not just a good man. He's not just a great teacher. He's not just a miracle worker. He is God with us. He is the Messiah, God's promised one.

He is absolutely unique in human history, because he is himself the Son of God, who Jesus is.

I've got to move on. He is the Christ of God. And then Jesus moves on, and having got this affirmation from Peter, not just an opinion as the people had given, but a conviction that Peter and the disciples had, that he is the Messiah, Jesus moves on, and he wants them to understand very clearly what it means that he is the Messiah.

[11 : 14] It can be quite puzzling as we read through the gospel, that sometimes Jesus tells people not to tell other people about him. So we've got that here in verse 21. Jesus strictly warned the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Now, why would he do that? The reason I believe he did that is if the disciples had gone out and said to the people, Jesus is the Messiah, he's the promised one of Israel, the people would have had totally false expectations about what he was going to do.

They were looking for a Messiah as someone who would come along, who would expel the Romans from their country, who would restore Israel to the independence and the ability to worship God as they wanted, that they had enjoyed in the past.

And so Jesus is saying to the disciples, I've given you, I've shown you this truth, but it's not yet one that the people are ready for. But he said, me being the Messiah has some implications, and it's not the ones that you may expect.

He said, the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and teachers of the law, must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

[12 : 35] The word that really struck me as I was reading this particular verse is the word must. The Son of Man must suffer. The Son of Man must be killed.

It is Jesus' mission. It is the purpose for his coming that he suffered and that he was killed and raised again. It wasn't something that just happened.

It wasn't something that for him was optional. That if things went well, he might not have to go through it. If things went badly, then he might well suffer. No, for Jesus, this was the very reason that he came.

He came so that he could suffer, so that he could die our death on the cross at Calvary, so he could be raised again, vindicating him on all that he'd done, all that he stood for, all that he preached, and presenting him to the world as the Messiah, the Son of God.

It was a compelling mission. Jesus must suffer. He must die. And again, if we're thinking about what it means to follow Jesus, that is the second thing that we need to grasp hold of.

[13 : 50] We need to understand who he is, that he's the Messiah, he's the Son of God, and we need to understand too that he came into this world specifically so that he could die for the sins of the world.

He lived a perfect life, looking forward always to his death on the cross at Calvary. It's only at this point in his relationship with the disciples that he starts talking about it, but undoubtedly Jesus knew throughout his life what it was he had come for and what the end would be.

Jesus must suffer. He must die. And of course he did that for us. He did that so that he could take on himself, my sins, that as I put my faith in him, as I trust him as Savior, as I recognize that he is my only hope for eternity, then I can look to his cross and say, Jesus died for me, and because he's taken my punishment, because he's taken my penalty, then I can have forgiveness and I can have a relationship with God.

It was a compelling mission. Jesus must suffer, must die. And then finally, in the remaining verses of the passage, we have what Jesus requires of us.

And it summarized particularly in verse 23. Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.

[15 : 26] Deny themselves, take up their cross daily and follow me. What does that mean? I think last Sunday evening, when Bruce was speaking to us from Luke chapter 3, we had as good a definition of that as I've ever heard.

And what Bruce said is that what it means to be a disciple of Jesus is to say yes to God, to say no to ourselves, whatever the cost. Yes to God, no to ourselves, whatever the cost.

And that's exactly what Jesus is saying here. He says, if having recognized who I am, if having recognized why I came, you are interested in following me and coming along with me, then that requires you to say yes to God, to say no to yourself, whatever the cost might be.

You have to deny yourself. What does deny yourself mean? Well, it's not just giving up a few things for Lent. It is saying that my will is going to be to do God's will.

My priority in life is to do what God wants me to do, not to satisfy the things that I might find superficially attractive and might want myself to do.

[16 : 37] We have to take up our cross. This for us is probably not quite as powerful a picture as it was to those disciples as they listened to Jesus.

They would be very familiar with the scene of someone who is carrying a cross through their town or their village. And one thing you knew if someone was carrying their cross, it was a one-way journey.

They wouldn't be coming back and their life was in someone else's hands. They were about to die in that case. And Jesus says, if you're following me, it's a one-way journey.

There's no turning back. You've got to be prepared to stay with me and to obey me, whatever the cost. And you've got to treat me as being even more important than life itself and to put yourself in my hands.

And he says then, you deny yourself, you take up the cross, and you follow me. Follow me, do the things that I did, look at my life and see the way that I lived it.

[17 : 42] Follow me perhaps even in my death, in being willing to go to death for my sake. For most of us, it won't come to that, but that is the willingness that Jesus requires.

But what does that mean on a day-to-day basis? I was thinking, what does it mean? What are the areas of my life where I need to deny myself, take up my cross, and follow Jesus? Let me suggest a few.

In the choices I make, we all have decisions to make in our lives about what we do, about the kind of direction we go in, about what our hopes and ambitions for the future are.

If I am denying myself, taking up my cross, and following Jesus, I want to make sure that my choices are aligned with His choices.

I'm not doing things independently, saying, here's what I think is right, what I think I should do. I want to be before God in prayer, and saying, Lord, what is it that you want me to do?

[18 : 43] Help me to make the right choices, and help me to be willing to carry them out. It's also about my relationships.

It's about how I interact with other people. Now, part of that is the people I choose to have relationships with, close relationships with, and whether that is in God's will.

It's also in the day-to-day relationships that we have with others. Someone hurts me, perhaps they say something nasty about me. What is my natural response to them? It is try and get back at them, and maybe say worse about them than they've said about me.

And Jesus says, no, that's not what it's all about. You have to deny yourself. You and what people think of you is not what's important. You need to follow my example.

And when people revile you, and you hate you, you don't respond, you don't react angrily. Rather, you depend on God, and you know that he is just, and you show them love and concern.

[19 : 46] And sometimes that really is denying ourselves, in a sense, taking up our cross, doing the things that we find really difficult, but actually which are really important if we are following Jesus.

My choices, my relationships, my work. Now, some of you, it may not be working. Maybe you're studying, or it may be what you do during the week, voluntary work, or interacting with your neighbours, or whatever.

My day-to-day life. It's not about Sundays, and I go and do something different during the week. My work, my daily life, has to be completely devoted to Jesus.

It will affect my choice of jobs, or it will affect whether I go for a promotion or not. It will affect what I choose to study. I need to be saying, Lord, what is it that you want me to be doing? What is your will for my life?

And I'm willing to follow in it. And yes, even my relaxation. The things I do in my leisure time, they too should be focused on what is it that is going to bring glory to God.

[20 : 49] Not that God doesn't want us to relax and to enjoy ourselves and have times of leisure. But even in that, we mustn't forget whose we are and who we serve.

I think it's great that there's a sports grouping set up in the church to talk about how those who are interested in sports can use that as part of their witness for the Lord Jesus and to pray for one another.

The Ember Collective, the musical group in the church, again, great people wanting to use their gifts and to put them at God's disposal and to join together in worship for him.

Even in our relaxation, we need to think, does that bring glory to God? Is that consistent with my commitment to the Lord Jesus?

So ultimately, what we're saying, it is my will that has to be totally surrendered. Remember we sang just a few minutes ago, take my will and make it thine.

[21 : 46] It shall be no longer mine. Now I suspect none of us can say that we match up to that standard. That we have totally submitted ourselves to Jesus and in every aspect of our life we seek to obey him, to deny ourselves, to take up our cross and to follow him.

But that's what we should be desiring for ourselves. There's one key word in the verse, I'm not sure why you can read that verse on the screen, there's one key word in this, in a saying of Jesus as Peter several times in the gospel that is only here.

And that is the word daily. Jesus says, take up your cross, daily, and follow me.

Sometimes we associate periods of commitment with Jesus when we first become a Christian, we put our trust in him, perhaps when we're baptized, or we go to a meeting or a rally where we're particularly moved and we rededicate ourselves to the Lord Jesus.

All of these are fantastic and there are times when we particularly feel the call of Christ on our lives. But Jesus is saying that shouldn't just be the exception. Every day you should be saying, how can I today serve Jesus and totally commit myself to him?

How can I today crucify myself and allow Jesus to be in total control of my life? How can I please Jesus today?

[23 : 18] Now perhaps you're looking at that thinking, well, is it worthwhile? Jesus is asking us to do so much for him, is it worth it? Well, one answer is it's worth it because of all that Jesus has done for us.

The fact that he came into this world, gave up all that he had and went to the cross and took our sins, nothing should be too much for us if we really love him.

But Jesus recognizes as he speaks to his disciples that actually what he's asking is hard. It's not something that comes easily or something that comes naturally. And so that's what the following verses are about.

So he says, whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. Or the converse of that, which actually comes first in the passage, whoever wants to save their life will lose it.

What good is it for someone to gain the whole world and yet lose or forfeit their own self? Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.

[24 : 25] Let's not get too involved in the detail of exactly what Jesus is saying at the end there. But let's just note that Jesus says whatever you give for him today, it's worth it.

We are here on this earth for a short time. After that, there is eternity and God will reward those who are faithful to the Lord Jesus. And perhaps if we have been ashamed of Jesus, perhaps we've been not wanting others to know we are a Christian or to really follow and serve him.

It doesn't mean we're not saved if our trust is in the Lord Jesus, if we know him as our saviour. But when we have to give account, there will be an element of shame that we haven't used our lives more for the Lord Jesus.

And those who have will have been willing to be totally dedicated to him. There will be appropriate reward for them. It will be worth it. That's very much what Jesus says.

It will be worth it if you are willing to do this for me. And then right there and just very briefly, he has this quite difficult verse 27.

[25 : 31] Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God. Now again, this is an encouragement clearly for the disciples to keep following him and to dedicate themselves to him.

Not entirely clear what he means when he says they won't see death before they see the kingdom of God. All the disciples clearly are dead now. Perhaps it refers to his death and resurrection.

Perhaps some people think it refers to the fall of Jerusalem when God's judgment was seen. I think most likely it actually refers to the following verses. When Jesus is transfigured before the disciples, when heaven in a sense comes to earth, as Moses and Elijah come down and are talking with Jesus, and there the disciples are seeing the kingdom of God.

Don't worry too much about it and if you disagree, feel free to talk to me afterwards. It's not the key thing that we're talking about this morning. I want to end with a quotation which I'm sure most people here will be very familiar with.

When I was young, I don't think you'd go to a youth rally without hearing someone quoting it. It's the words taken from a journal of a 22-year-old American with a Scottish brethren heritage who six years later would be martyred when he was in Ecuador by the Alca Indians he'd gone to with the gospel.

[26 : 51] His name is Jim Elliott and they say most of you will be familiar with it but it's such a powerful saying. There's a 22-year-old man writing a saying, he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.

He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose. Let's take that away today and think about it as we think too on the words of Jesus.

Are we willing to give up for Jesus anything, everything in this life knowing that he has a much greater reward anything that we give up will be more than amply rewarded in eternity?

Do we see him as the Messiah as the Son of God? Do we recognise why he came? Have we got our trust in him as Saviour as he said he must suffer and he must die?

Are we, am I, willing to deny myself, take up my cross daily and follow him? Let's pray together. Our Father, we thank you for your word to us.

[28 : 11] We acknowledge that these words of Jesus are really, really challenging for us. That they go against everything that our human nature would desire.

That where we want to be independent and to make our own choices, Jesus is asking us to allow him to be the one who guides our thoughts and our actions.

And yet we want to recognise his greatness, we want to recognise who he is, we want to recognise particularly what he has done for us. That he went to the cross, that he took on himself the punishment that I deserved.

We pray that you will help us to be wholly committed to him, to take that step daily of saying, Lord, what is it that you require of me today?

How can I today take up my cross and follow you? And every aspect of our lives, may we be committed and dedicated to him. We thank you for your word, we thank you for the privilege we've had this morning too, of sharing fellowship with one another and of worshipping together.

[29 : 18] And we commit ourselves to you now as we give our thanks in Jesus' name. Amen.