

Identity Crisis

Matthew 21:5, 9-10

We all have one. We are born with one and we will die with one. Throughout our life we will always have one and at various stages of our life it will change. As a matter of fact, at any given time we can have several at the same time.

If you grew up reading comic books or watching Saturday morning cartoons, superheroes had a secret one. By now you may have guessed that I am referring to your identity. The dictionary defines identity as the distinguishing character or personality of an individual.

Psychology Today defines identity as those things which encompass memories, experiences, relationships, and the values you hold that create one's sense of self. Your identity includes multiple roles. My identity is made up of roles like husband, father, grandfather, uncle, pastor, citizen among others. Each role holds certain meaning and expectations that are internalized into your identity, something that shifts with time, age, and maturity. Your identity can dictate the choices you make.

Many find that their identity revolves around what they do. If or when that changes or is taken away, they may find a sense of loss or uncertainty about who they are or about their purpose. They may flounder until they find a new identity.

For example, a mother whose identity is wrapped up completely in her children while they are living at home may find that once they leave a deep void is left that creates an uncertainty about purpose. It can result in depression and a sense of great loss.

The same can be true of a person whose identity is wrapped up in a career they have had their entire lives. When they retire, there may be a sense of loss, a lack of enjoyment in anything else because their identity has been removed.

An athlete who has been consumed since early in life with a particular sport can find himself in the same kind of predicament.

It can even happen in a marriage relationship, where

the identity of one spouse finds its purpose in the other spouse. When that is gone, so is the identity.

Many have asked the question throughout life or at different stages of life – Who am I? They want to know their identity. They want an answer to that question in order to give life meaning and purpose. When that's not evident or they can't find an answer or there is a loss of identity because of a change in work status or relationships, they may go through what's called an identity crisis.

An identity crisis is a period of uncertainty and confusion in which a person's sense of identity becomes insecure, typically due to a change in their expected aims or role in society.

Now when it comes to the gospel accounts of Jesus, we find that there were differing opinions about His identity. Views about Him varied.

There are those who do not believe in a historical Jesus, meaning they didn't believe that He ever actually existed. For example, Bertrand Russell stated, "Historically it is quite doubtful whether Christ ever existed at all, and if He did we do not know anything about Him."

Russell stands in the minority, though. Even secular scholars believe that Jesus was a real person. We should all be familiar with the name Thomas Paine of American Revolutionary fame. While he held that Christianity was contemptable and did not believe in the deity of Jesus, even he did not doubt His historicity believing that He was an actual person. He stated "He [Jesus Christ] was a virtuous and amiable man. The morality that He preached and practiced was of the most benevolent kind; and though similar systems of morality had been preached by Confucius, and by some of the Greek philosophers, many years before; by the Quakers since; and by many good men in all ages, it has not been exceeded by any."

Even though serious secular historians believe the deity of Jesus is merely a myth, they do not question that an historical Jesus existed in time some 2,000 years ago.

Tim LaHaye writes, “Almost everyone who has heard of Jesus has developed an opinion about Him. That is to be expected, for He is not only the most famous person in world history, but also the most controversial.”

What people believe about Jesus today is no different than when He walked this earth. From Matthew’s account of Jesus’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem the week before His crucifixion, I want to use this as a springboard, if you will, to answer the question that Jesus once asked His disciples: who do men say that I am?

Matthew 21:1-11

It is evident from this passage that even after 3 ½ years of ministry where He openly taught and performed many miracles, people, even the disciples were unclear about who Jesus really was.

Keep in mind that for the most part Jesus avoided Jerusalem. It wasn’t because there were wanted posters stapled to the gates leading in and out of the city and plastered on every corner lamppost. It’s a legitimate question asked by the residents of Jerusalem. Who is this guy? What makes Him so special? Why all the uproar?

You know the scene well. It was the time of the Passover in which all Jews traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate. It commemorated that grand exodus from Egypt as God delivered them from bondage by the hand of Moses. The night they were delivered, they were to kill a lamb and sprinkle its blood on the door post so that when the angel of death came through the camp, he would pass over their home because the blood was a covering.

As these pilgrims approached the city, they recited the Hallel Psalms, or the psalms of praise found in **Psalms 113-118**. It was a joyful celebration. The pilgrims would recite them and then those in the city would echo back a response. There was an added element of joyfulness due to the presence of Jesus. Many Jews believed the Messiah would reveal Himself at the Passover. A massive crowd approached the city with Jesus in the middle. It’s difficult to say, but some scholars estimate the

population around Passover swelled to well over hundred thousand people. While singing the Hallel Psalms they are proclaiming the words of the Prophet Zechariah “**Say to the Daughter of Zion, ‘See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’**”

Sometimes just called Zion, Mt. Zion was the highest and most prominent hill in Jerusalem. The city was called the Daughter of Zion for that reason. They quote from **Zechariah 9:9**, which was written some 500 years before this event and here declaring Jesus to be king. Matthew wants us to understand that these events fulfilled prophecy, including His riding into Jerusalem on a donkey.

Now I learned something new this past week in my studies of this very familiar passage. I knew that waving palm branches and placing them on the ground along with their coats was a symbol of submission. I knew that donkeys were a symbol of peace and that donkeys were also ridden by kings. I didn’t know that there was a breed of donkeys specially bred for kings. This was not one of those donkeys. It was tied up in the city. It was a beast of burden. It was a work animal. But that’s not the most important thing I learned. Back in **Exodus 13:13**, God gave instructions that every firstborn from the womb had to be redeemed by the sacrifice of a lamb as a payment for the firstborn. Donkeys were considered an unclean animal and it says in Exodus that if you didn’t redeem the firstborn donkey you were required to put it to death. Now, we have no way of knowing whether the donkey Jesus rode was firstborn, but what is striking to me is that here is the one who would redeem mankind riding into Jerusalem on an animal that itself had to be redeemed. I find that rather fascinating.

Even though I think they missed the symbolism of the donkey as they hailed Him king, we also read in **verse 9** that they hailed Him as the “**Son of David**”, a popular Jewish title used for the Messiah. For example, in **Matthew 12:23** after Jesus cast out a demon, the people who were there asked if Jesus might be the Son of David. Is this the Messiah?

But when those in Jerusalem asked who this was

that was coming into the city, the people who had just proclaimed Him as king and Messiah, could only answer that He was a prophet from Nazareth.

As we look back throughout His life and ministry, His identity was clearly lost to them. Many made different conclusions about Jesus's identity. First of all many thought He was just a man.

I. HE WAS JUST A MAN – Matt. 13:53-57a

From Mark's account of this event we learn that just prior to Jesus travelling to His hometown of Nazareth He had healed a woman of a 12-year illness and raised a dead girl from the dead. Matthew tells us that it was after He had taught in the synagogue and performed some miracles that the people were astonished.

Nazareth was a non-descript little town of insignificance. It reminds me of the little town I grew up in. It didn't change much; the people were simple peasants. Not much happened there and no one of importance ever came from it. Even Nathanael asked if any good thing could come from Nazareth. But here was Jesus. They knew Him because they knew His family. Wasn't He the carpenter's son? Wasn't Mary His mother? Don't His brothers and sisters still live here? **"Where did this man get all these things?"** They were of course referring to the wisdom of His teaching and the ability to do miracles. By now the gossip and scandal of Mary's seeming indiscretion resulting in her pregnancy out of wedlock had died down, but everyone knew about it. They had watched Jesus grow up and live there for about 30 years. To them He was just a man. Don't believe for a moment the stories you might read about where Jesus when He was a child would make pigeons out of mud and miraculously bring them to life. Growing up He gave no impression other than that he was growing up to be a man. **Luke 2:52** tells us that He increased in wisdom and stature meaning that He grew up. **John 1:14** tells us that He was flesh. Read through the gospels and you get a sense of His humanity. He was tired and He slept. He was hungry and thirsty. He wept and agonized.

He bled and died.

Subject to the same physical and emotional needs of any other human, Jesus was a man, but to most, if not all, He was just a man. But to many, He was also just a moral man.

II. HE WAS JUST A MORAL MAN

Refer back to what Thomas Paine said, that the morality Jesus both taught and practiced exceeded that of any other person. In essence His character was very moral, nothing else.

I Peter 1:19 likens Jesus to a lamb that is spotless, without defect. In **2:22** Peter says He committed no sin nor was there any deceit in His mouth.

Hebrews 4:15 states that He was without sin and in **7:26-27** He is said to be holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, and that He didn't need to offer any sacrifices for sin.

Paul explained to the Corinthians that Jesus knew no sin (**II Corinthians 5:21**).

During the hours of His trial Judas, Pilate, Herod, Pilate's wife, the repentant thief, and the Roman centurion all said He was innocent.

In **Luke 1:35** when the angel informed Mary that she would bare the Christ child, he described the one to be born as the holy one or the holy child.

You might say those are biased accounts of His sinless nature which reflects His moral character.

John 8:46

There is an argument from silence about the morality of Jesus. In a discussion with the Pharisees, Jesus asked them to point out one sin He had committed. They said nothing because they had no evidence of any wrongdoing on His part. He taught morality because He lived a moral life. The word good refers to moral character. It can also refer to doing something good that would benefit someone else. For example, in **Luke 6:9** when healing the man on the Sabbath, which the Pharisees objected, Jesus asked if it was right to do good or evil on the Sabbath? Jesus did good

because He was good, but many only saw Him as a moral man and nothing more.

While many saw Jesus as a moral man, others saw Him as just a malefactor.

III. HE WAS JUST A MALEFACTOR

You know what a malefactor is, right? In the Greek it's a compound word meaning evil work. In **Luke 23:32** it's the term used for the other two criminals who were crucified alongside Jesus. Because He was also crucified, He was guilty by association. So while many thought Jesus to be a moral man, others, primarily the Pharisees, believed that He was a sinner, someone worthy of death.

One day as Jesus and His disciples were walking along chatting about this and that, they noticed a blind man. They were curious to know something of the nature of the man's blindness. It was a common teaching, something believed as far back as Job that sin caused bad things to happen. So the disciples asked Jesus who had sinned that this man should be born blind. Was it his parents? Or was it the man? One has to wonder what an infant still in the womb can do that would be considered sin. Did he kick his mother once too many times? Was he born blind because he caused his mother to have morning sickness? But there it is they laid it out before Jesus. Who was the sinner, teacher?

Jesus stated that neither he nor his parents had sinned, but that he was born blind to show the glory of God. He then spit on the ground and made a mud pack and put it on the man's eyes and gave instructions to wash it off in the nearby pool.

Beside himself with delight about his newfound vision, his neighbors wondered if this was the same guy who used to sit and beg for a living. Isn't that blind Henry. Some believed it was. Others thought it was someone who looked like him. They were curious about how it was he was now able to see, and he plainly told them it was the one they call Jesus. It's unclear to me why they felt the necessity to bring him to the Pharisees other than perhaps because it was on the Sabbath and John makes a

careful note to make sure we know what day this miracle occurred. They asked how it was he could now see to which the previously blind now seeing man told them that Jesus made a mud ball and put it on his eyes and told him to go wash in the pool.

I'd like to think that I might burst out into a round of praise God from whom all blessings flow, but not these religious leaders. They were incensed that someone would dare do any manual labor on the Sabbath. **John 9:16** gives us the plain truth of their thoughts. **"This man is not from God, for He does not keep the Sabbath. How can a sinner do such miraculous signs?"**

Now the previously blind now seeing man knew nothing of Jesus other than describing Him as a prophet in **verse 17**. They continued to question both the man and his parents and concluded that Jesus was nothing more than a sinner, though we just noted from **John 8:46** that they could cite no example of any sin Jesus had committed when He invoked them to try. In their opinion, because He had broken their manmade laws, He was a sinner.

Before we go any farther, let's be clear about one thing. If Jesus had committed even just one sin, He would not be sinless and He would not have been a suitable sacrifice to atone for our sin. We would still be dead in sin, with no hope of eternal life. He needed to be perfect in order to pay the sacrifice God required for our sin. It's the essence of the song by Twila Paris.

Your only Son no sin to hide
But You have sent Him from Your side
To walk upon this guilty sod
And to become the Lamb of God

Your gift of love they crucified
They laughed and scorned Him as He died
The humble King they named a fraud
And sacrificed the Lamb of God

Oh Lamb of God, sweet Lamb of God
I love the Holy Lamb of God
Oh wash me in His precious Blood
My Jesus Christ the Lamb of God

Even today many consider Jesus to be a man, even a moral man, while others hold that like any other man, He too was a sinner, a common criminal, a malefactor. They called Him a glutton and sinner for hanging around those kinds of people. They called Him a blasphemer for claiming to be God. They called Him the devil himself because He cast out demons. Their identity of Jesus was flawed because they had a flawed heart.

There were a few who saw Him as just a mad man.

IV. HE WAS JUST A MAD MAN

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 — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — 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.”

In **John 10:20** the Jews called Jesus raving mad because He claimed to know the Father.

In **Mark 3:20-21** Jesus and His disciples were so busy meeting the needs of the people who came to them that they didn’t even have time to eat. Jesus’s mother and brothers came to take charge of Him. **“When His family heard about this, they went to take charge of Him, for they said, ‘He is out of His mind.’”** In other words, they thought He was crazy or as Wavoord/Zuck state **“He was a mentally unbalanced religious fanatic.”** Until the resurrection none of His brothers believed He was the Messiah. Anyone who would believe and say the things He said and keep the kind of frenzied schedule He kept

must be a lunatic and as C.S. Lewis said, on par with someone claiming to be a poached egg.

If He is not God, then He is a liar. If He is not God, then He is not a prophet who spoke the truth and would be nothing more than a deceiver. If He was a deceiver, he was not a moral man. If He is not God and knew He was not but said those things anyways to deceive us, it’s the biggest scam ever and we have been duped into believing a lie. If He truly believed He was God even though He was not then He’s not a deceiver, He’s just plain crazy.

But if He was either a liar or a mad man how could He do all the miracles we read about in the gospels? So, while some thought He was only a mad man, many believed that He was just a miracle worker.

V. HE WAS JUST A MIRACLE WORKER

We have probably all seen a great magician and we know it’s just a bunch of smoke and mirrors, but we still wonder how they do those mind-blowing tricks? There are many skeptics, even among liberal theologians who want to sweep away the miracles by claiming that it was just some slight of hand. The miraculous catch of fish has been explained away by saying that Jesus was standing on a high bank and could see the large school of fish on the other side of the boat. That’s why He told them to cast their net on the other side.

How do they explain giving sight to the man born blind? His friends all knew he was blind from birth.

How do they explain the man with the deformed hand having it restored?

How do they explain Lazarus being raised again after being dead for four days?

How do they explain feeding thousands with a few fish and loaves of bread until they were satisfied?

Many believed Jesus had some special ability to do the miracles He did, just like the Old Testament prophets and they only followed Him because of His miracles, to see Him do something else or to get something themselves. Many followed Him into Jerusalem because they had seen Him raise Lazarus from the dead. While they were amazed, they remained unmoved. The Pharisees wanted Jesus to

show them a sign and they would believe. **How can you witness miracle after miracle and remain unconvinced?**

When Jesus calmed the storm, the disciples asked who this was that even the winds obey Him.

After the resurrection John would write **“Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.” (John 20:30-31)**

While many thought of Him just as a miracle worker, someone with a special gift to do the extraordinary, many thought of Him just as a messenger.

VI. HE WAS JUST A MESSENGER

That’s what Nicodemus thought when he had his nighttime rendezvous with Jesus to discuss spiritual things launching the whole discussion about what it means to be born again giving to us the shortest but greatest gospel message ever on how to be saved **(John 3:16)**. Nicodemus said in **John 3:2 “We know you are a teacher/messenger sent by God.”**

Others who heard Him remarked about how amazed they were at what He taught because it was with authority. He didn’t teach like the religious leaders. He was truly a gifted teacher, a messenger of God.

People have held a variety of opinions about the identity of Jesus. But the Bible gives us one more clear evidence of His identity. He was the Messiah. That’s what the crowds said going into Jerusalem.

VII. HE WAS THE MESSIAH

Jesus had no uncertainty about who He was.

According to **Luke 19:10**, He knew His purpose was to seek and to save the lost.

In **John 14:6**, He exclaimed that no one could come to the Father because He was the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Jesus explained to the Samaritan woman in **John 4** that He was the Messiah whom they believed would come and that whoever drank from the water of life He gave would have eternal life.

So we come back to the question Jesus asked the disciples about His identity. Others had varying opinions of Him being a good teacher or one of the great prophets like John the Baptist or Elijah. But then He asked a pointed question. A question that everyone of us is asked and one that we must all answer. **Who do you say that I am?**

The pilgrims travelling to Jerusalem that day said He was the king, the Son of David In essence, the Messiah, but at the end of the day, they only thought of Him as a prophet. They weren’t looking for a spiritual Messiah to take away their sin, they were looking for a political Messiah who would deliver them from the oppression of Rome.

When Jesus asked His disciples who they thought He was, Peter declared in **Matthew 16:16** that He was the Christ, the Son of the living God, Jesus did not deny it, or rebuke him by correcting his answer. Jesus went on to say that God the Father had made that known to Peter. When the people declared at His triumphal entry that He was a king and the Messiah, He didn’t deny it or correct them either.

On one occasion, as Jesus was teaching, He made some very difficult statements about what it was to follow Him and believe in Him. We read in **John 6:66** that many of His disciples no longer followed Him. They left Him because His teachings were challenging. Jesus then turned to the 12 disciples and asked if they would also leave Him. Peter spoke for them all. Now remember Peter could say some incredibly bone-headed things, but on this occasion, he spoke with wisdom and clarity **“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that You are the Holy One of God.” (John 6:68-69)**

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem, the crowds only wanted to accept Him on their terms. They knew He was a king, and they knew the nature of His kingdom that it was from God, but they were not

willing to accept that kingdom, because it didn't fit the narrative of their Messiah. And that's like so many people today. They only want Jesus if He will give them what they want, if He will teach them only what they want to hear. If they confess Him to be the Messiah then they have to accept that a change is required in their lives. They would rather chant with the Pharisees "we have no king but Caesar."

As we think about the day Jesus rode into Jerusalem how do you see Jesus? What is His identity to you? Are you confused about Him or is there conviction that you know He is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God, the One who came to seek and save the lost, the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world?

In his book on Discipleship, Dwight Pentecost describes three types of people when it comes to following Jesus. There are the curious, the convinced and the committed.

In which category would you put yourself? Are you merely curious because of the things you have heard or seen about Him?

Are you convinced that He is who He claims to be but you're not yet ready to follow Him? If so, what's holding you back?

Are you committed to Him because you know without a shadow of a doubt that He is the Messiah, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world?

Alexander MacLaren writes that "unless we know Christ to be the Savior of our souls and the Lamb of God, we shall soon tire of saying hosannas...but if we have learned who and what He is to us, then let us open our mouths wide and let us not be afraid of letting the world hear our shout of praise."

In a week, the shouts of celebration will turn to shouts of condemnation. It all comes down to your belief about the identity of Jesus. **Who is He to you?**