

INTRODUCTION

I read about a scientist named Howard Kelly. Kelly regularly wore a button that had a big question mark on it. It got people's attention of course and they were always asking him what it meant. So he told them. He said it stood for the single most significant question that a person can ask. As you can imagine, that piqued their curiosity even further and compelled them to ask, *"What is that question?"*

How would you answer that? What is the single most significant question that a person can ask? Dr. Kelly's response always was the same, *"Who is Jesus?"* and he was right. That is the single most significant question that a person can ask. Who is Jesus?

During the Easter season, I preached about what Jesus did. Today, I'm going to preach about whom He is. Turn to the passage I read, Luke 5:17-26, and let's examine the claim and character of Jesus.

JESUS' CLAIM

In verses 17-20, Jesus was teaching to a crowd of people that included some scribes and Pharisees. While He was teaching, several men set down a paralyzed friend of theirs in front of Him so that He would heal him. Seeing the faith of these men, He immediately said to their paralyzed friend, *"Your sins are forgiven you."*

The scribes and Pharisees, in verse 21, instantly reacted to what He said. They spoke to each other these words, *"Who can forgive sins, but God alone?"* Who besides God, in other words, can forgive sins? The correct answer is *"No one."* No one can forgive sins but God alone.

Let's get this in perspective by way of analogy. Suppose that I borrow \$500 from Joe Markota, promise to pay him back, but then refuse to do so. It is possible for Joe to say that he forgives me for defrauding him. After all, he is the one against whom I sinned. But suppose that one of you discover what I did and say that you forgive me for defrauding Joe. That would be presumptuous of you and not possible because I

didn't sin against you. It's a basic fact of life that only the one who is sinned against can forgive the sinner.

That explains verses 20-21. The words "your sins" in verse 20 show that this paralyzed man had sinned against God. Since only the one who is sinned against can forgive the sinner, only God could forgive Him. But Jesus said that He forgave Him. He was saying in doing so, "*I am God.*"

I don't know if the rest of the crowd picked up on that or not but the scribes and Pharisees most certainly did. They understood quite clearly what Jesus was saying and it disturbed them greatly. That's why they said what they did in verse 21. This man speaks blasphemy!

That shows what the claim of Jesus was, "*I am God.*" He made that claim in this passage and others including Matthew 9:14-15; John 5:16-18; 8:56-59; 9:35-38; 10:30-33; 14:7.

But it wasn't just Jesus who claimed that He is God. So does the New Testament in these verses: 1 Corinthians 2:16; 8:6; 1 Thessalonians 3:11; 2 Thessalonians 1:8; 2:16; 1 Timothy 1:1-2; Titus 2:13; 3:4,6; Hebrews 1:2; 1:8; 1:10-12; 2 Peter 1:1; and Revelation 1:17; 5:8; and 5:13. I've studied each of these verses carefully and objectively. They all teach that same thing. Jesus is God.

But it isn't just Jesus and the New Testament writers. It's the early church as well. In his book Reasonable Faith, William Lane Craig shows that the church had a full-blown Christology proclaiming that Jesus is God within 20 years of the resurrection. Church historian Jaroslav Pelikan confirms that. He points out in his book The Christian Tradition that the oldest Christian sermon, the oldest account of a Christian martyr, the oldest pagan report on the church, and the oldest liturgical prayer all refer to Jesus as God, each one dating back to the 1st century AD.

I say all of that to say this. There's no doubt that Jesus and those who saw and heard Him claimed that He is God.

Now, that is a staggering claim isn't it? It's so staggering in fact that there is no parallel to it in any of the world's other religions. C.S. Lewis made that clear in his book God in the Dock. He wrote: "*If you*

had gone to Socrates and asked, 'Are you Zeus?' he would have laughed at you. If you had gone to Mohammed and asked, 'Are you Allah?' he would have first rent his clothes and then cut off your head. If you had asked Confucius, 'Are you Heaven?' I think he would probably have replied, 'Remarks which are not in accordance with nature are in bad taste.'" The founder of no other religion has ever made the claim that Jesus did, *"I am God."*

JESUS' CHARACTER

But is He? That's the central question of human life. Is Jesus who He said He is? Is He God?

Many say that He isn't. That includes the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses. They believe that Jesus is alive today but that He is not God. He is instead the highest being that God has created.

Two Mormon missionaries came to my house this past fall. They asked if they could talk to me and I said, "yes" on one condition – that we begin by discussing who Jesus is. I then said this: *"I believe He is God and you believe that He is not. If He is God and you believe that He is not, then you are a blasphemer and heretic. If He is not God and I believe that He is, then I am a blasphemer and heretic. The watershed issue is whether or not Jesus is God and we need to address that together."* They apparently didn't want to do that though because they politely excused themselves and left.

What I said is true. That is the watershed issue. Who is Jesus? Is He God or is He not God?

He Himself addressed that issue in verses 22-26. He asked the scribes and Pharisees a good question. Is it easier to say that I am God or to make a paralyzed man walk? You know that answer to that. I can say to you that I am God. I cannot make a paralyzed man walk. But Jesus did and confirmed His claim in the process, *"I am God."*

In the end, however, it wasn't primarily His miracles that confirmed or backed up His claim. It was His character.

Let me ask you. Have other people ever claimed to be God. Yes, they have. When I was practicing law, I represented clients who had been probated, forcefully placed in a mental institution. Two of those clients I had claimed the same thing – that they were God. One even told me that he was running the universe from the room that he was in, which, as you can imagine, made defending Him quite difficult.

Anyway, that is a possible explanation for this staggering claim that Jesus made? Maybe He made it because He was mentally ill.

But we know that He wasn't because of His character. By character I mean His psychological condition, the condition of His inner dimensions. Psychologists can judge people's claims by their character and we can do the same with Jesus. And when we do, we find that He wasn't mentally ill. On the contrary, His character confirms or backs up His claim.

Dr. Gary Collins is a highly regarded clinical psychologist, prolific author, and avid follower of Jesus. He states that Jesus had all the marks of strong character, of psychological health. Collins describes it this way: *"He was loving but didn't let his compassion immobilize him; he didn't have a bloated ego, even though he was often surrounded by adoring crowds; he maintained balance despite an often demanding lifestyle; he always knew what he was doing and where he was going; he cared deeply about people, including women and children, who weren't seen as being important back then; he was able to accept people while not merely winking at their sin; and he responded to individuals based on where they were at and what they uniquely needed."* He was, in other words, a man of great character, of exemplary psychological health.

C. S. Lewis summed it up well. Because of the claim He made, Jesus was one of three things: a lunatic on the level of a man who says he's a poached egg, a hellish liar, or the Lord God.

So which is it? Is Jesus a lunatic, liar, or the Lord God? The answer is that He's the Lord God. How do I know that? It's because His character, His psychological condition, confirms it. No lunatic or liar

could have the character that He did. It was perfect.

OUR CLAIM AND CHARACTER

Now, there's a critical lesson here for us all. That lesson is this. We need to do the same thing that Jesus did - back up our claim.

You know what our claim is. We claim that we're Christians. The Bible uses that word only three times, in Acts 11:26; 26:28 and 1 Peter 4:16. But we use it commonly today. The Greek word translated "Christians" connotes partisans of Christ. So that's what we're claiming when we say that we're Christians. We're partisans or followers of Jesus.

That's our claim and our challenge regarding it is to confirm it. To confirm it means to back it up. It means to demonstrate to Jesus Himself, the angels of heaven, the demons of hell, and people that we really are what we claim to be – partisans of Jesus.

There are several ways to do that, the primary of which is through our character. Remember what our character is. It's our psychological condition, the condition of our inner dimensions. Well, it's that more than anything else that backs up or denies our claim to be Christians. Jesus, angels, demons, and people judge the truth or falsehood of our claim by our character.

Let me ask you a personal question that I've asked myself. What do all of those conclude when they examine my character? Do they conclude that I am or am not what I claim to be – a partisan of Jesus?

A secretary once told me that a person she didn't know called her up and angrily yelled at her for something. The secretary happened to mention her name in passing and I know her. She's a long established Christian who is actively involved in her Bible believing church. Angerily yelling at the secretary revealed her character. Let me ask you. Does that character back up or deny her claim that she's a partisan of Jesus. The answer is obvious. It denies it.

Unfortunately, that kind of character revealing behavior is the standard among Christians. Dallas Willard writes about the many sex

scandals that have rocked the church. He then goes on to say: *"But sex is far from being the only problem. The presence of vanity, egotism, hostility, fear, indifference, and downright meanness can be counted on among professing Christians. Their opposites cannot be counted on or assumed in the 'standard' Christian group."* I'm not a pessimist but Willard is right. I've seen and experienced it in countless groups of Christians over the years.

But I have a different vision for us. My vision is that you and I as individuals and that we as a congregation will not be the "standard" that Willard writes about. It's that our character will not deny but back up our claim - that it will show Jesus angels, demons, and people that we are partisans of Jesus. That's my vision and I hope it's yours as well.

The good news is that we can achieve it if it is. We can achieve it by committing ourselves to Christian spiritual formation. Christian spiritual formation is the process by which the Holy Spirit transforms our inner dimensions into the image and likeness of Jesus. It's the process, in other words, by which the Holy Spirit makes our character Christlike.

That process, as you can see, is primarily the work of the Holy Spirit but we do have a part to play in it. We must do certain things that place us before the Holy Spirit in such a way that He can make our character Christlike. Learn and do those things. That's our call today. Learn and do the things that enable the Holy Spirit to make our character Christlike.

I'm teaching a Sunday school class right now entitled *Out of the Heart*. The specific aim of that class is to teach you those things and to assist you in doing them. I invite you to come and participate in it.

CONCLUSION

I close this morning with the two most significant questions that a person can ask. First, who is Jesus? He is God! That's His claim and His character confirms it. Second, who am I? I am a Christian! That's our claim but does our character confirm it? Let's commit ourselves to Christian spiritual formation and there's no doubt. It will.