

## Who Is This Man?

Romans 12:1-8 & Matthew 16:13-20  
Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church  
1001 W. Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616  
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### Romans 12:1-8 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup>Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship. <sup>2</sup>Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will.

<sup>3</sup>For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. <sup>4</sup>Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, <sup>5</sup>so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. <sup>6</sup>We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. <sup>7</sup>If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; <sup>8</sup>if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

### Matthew 16:13-20 (NIV)

<sup>13</sup>When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" <sup>14</sup>They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." <sup>15</sup>"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" <sup>16</sup>Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." <sup>17</sup>Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. <sup>18</sup>And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. <sup>19</sup>I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." <sup>20</sup>Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

## Who Is This Man?

Every once in a while the news media carries a story about a man who claims to be the Messiah. It happened in Knoxville, TN not too long ago. A local man, claiming to be Jesus Christ, was arrested after he assaulted his wife.

The man was charged with assault under the domestic violence law. The warrant stated that he assaulted his wife, shoved her into a chair and threatened her if she left him. He also ripped out a telephone and smashed a car windshield.

“He was yelling about being Jesus,” a deputy wrote in the warrant. At the Knox County Jail, a corrections officer compiling computer records asked the man his religion. “I’m Jesus,” he replied. He also told jail officials he wanted John, Paul and Moses on his visitors’ list. At last report he was being held on \$5,000 bond and was scheduled to appear in General Sessions Court. Obviously he was a troubled man.

Psychologist Milton Rokeach once wrote a book titled *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti*. He described his attempts to treat three patients at a psychiatric hospital in Ypsilanti, Michigan, who suffered from delusions of grandeur. Each believed he was unique among humankind; each believed he had been called to save the world; each believed he was the Messiah. These were full-blown cases of grandiosity in its pure form.

Rokeach found it difficult to break through, to help these patients accept the truth about their identity. So he decided to put the three into a little community, to see if rubbing against other people who also claimed to be the Messiah might dent their delusion. He did this as kind of a messianic, 12-step program.

As you can imagine this led to some interesting conversations. One would claim, “I’m the Messiah, the Son of God. I was sent here to save the earth.” “How do you know?” Rokeach would ask. “God told me,” one answered. One of the other patients would counter, “I never told you any such thing.” Every once in a while, one would get a glimmer of reality — never deep or for very long. Deeply ingrained was their Messiah complex. But what progress Rokeach made was pretty much made by putting them together in the same room.

In first century Palestine it was not unusual for people to come along and claim to be the Messiah. After all, the Jewish people had been looking for a Messiah for hundreds of years — one who would come to deliver the Jews from their enemies. It was not unusual for a person — either out of an irrational spirit of grandiosity or as a cynical means of acquiring power — to claim to be the one whom the people had been waiting for.

How would the people be able to discern who was the genuine Messiah and who was not? Even John the Baptist was unsure of how to judge.

John the Baptist was one of the most prominent religious figures of his time, rivaling Jesus in popularity. John considered himself to be the forerunner of the Messiah. It was his task to announce the coming of the Lord. At Jesus’ baptism — which was performed by John — John thought he had it figured out. Jesus was the One who was to come. He was the Messiah.

Jesus was John’s cousin. They had grown up together. So John was in a position to know there was something special about Jesus. It’s not surprising, then, when Jesus came to where John was baptizing people in the River Jordan and asked to be baptized, John tried to deter Him. John said, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

Further, Matthew tells us that as soon as Jesus was baptized, He came up out of the water. And at that moment heaven was opened, and Jesus saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on Him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased.” Note that it does not say that John saw the dove or heard the voice. Still, it is evident that John thought Jesus was the One.

However, it was no slam dunk. Jesus never did quite act like the Messiah they were expecting. It’s probable that John shared the common expectation that the coming Messiah would be a military-type figure who would stir up the people to revolt against the iron grip of Rome. But His cousin was content to be a humble teacher and healer. Could John have been mistaken?

Later, when John was imprisoned, he sent two of his disciples to Jesus with a message. When the men came to Jesus, they said, “John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, ‘Are you the One who is to come, or should we expect someone else?’”

It appears that John was confused by the direction Jesus’ ministry was taking. It was not as obvious that Jesus was the Messiah as John had hoped. In response to John’s question, Jesus answered: “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor (Luke 7 20-22).”

Obviously being a Messiah had nothing to do with fomenting revolt. Evidently, healing those who are hurting and proclaiming good news to the poor was what being the Messiah was all about. Even Jesus’ closest friends and family were confused about Jesus’ ministry.

So it was a big deal on this occasion when Simon Peter testified that Jesus certainly was the One who was to come. You know the story. It happened in the region of Caesarea Philippi which was a center of pagan worship. Jesus asked His disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” “But what about you?” Jesus asked. “Who do you say I am?” And Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus was pleased with Peter’s answer and replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

“You are the Messiah,” said Simon Peter, “the Son of the living God.” The question that confronts you and me today is the same one that confronted those early disciples. Who do you say Jesus Christ is? Opinions vary.

FOR SOME PEOPLE JESUS IS AN EXAMPLE OF THE BEST OF WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HUMAN.

For them Jesus is the ideal person for us to emulate. He is the model for what we should all be.

Haddon Robinson, in his book *What Jesus Said*, notes that after World War I, General Pershing planned a series of victory parades through many European capitals. He needed 27,000 soldiers to march in those parades, and each participant was to possess two qualities. Each soldier was to have an unblemished military record, and he was to stand at least one meter, eighty-six centimeters tall.

Forty American soldiers, guarding an ammunition dump about one hundred miles from Paris, read with interest the notice about Pershing's victory marches. What is more, each man in the company met the first qualification. Their military record was unblemished.

The second condition, however, puzzled them. They did not know how high one meter, eighty-six centimeters was. The corporal asked the sergeant, and the sergeant didn't know. Then the corporal said, "Well, Sarge, I know that I'm taller than you are."

After that it began. Since nobody in camp knew how tall one meter, eighty-six centimeters was, the soldiers began to compare themselves with one another. They stood back to back like children in a kindergarten until they knew who the tallest through the shortest men in the company were.

Slim, the tallest, kidded his buddies that, since he knew he was the tallest he also knew he would be selected. Therefore he would take a look at the girls in the European capitals for the rest of the company and send back picture postcards. Shorty, the shortest man in the company, knew that if he marched in the parade, everyone else would too.

When a captain from headquarters arrived to find out if anybody qualified, the soldiers told him their problem, "We don't know how tall one meter, eighty-six centimeters is." So the captain translated the meters and centimeters into feet and inches and made a mark on the mess hall wall.

Some of the men looked at that mark and turned away, knowing they could not measure up to it. Others stood up against the wall, but they fell short of the mark by an inch or more. Finally Slim stretched himself as tall as possible, but even Slim fell one-quarter of an inch short. Not one of them came to the six feet, one and one-fifth inches that one meter, eighty-six centimeters represents.

Pershing eventually found qualified men who marched in his victory parades, but the point of the story is that when we have an absolute standard to measure ourselves by, it is futile to measure ourselves against other men and women. We must measure ourselves by the standard of Christ.

Jesus is, of course, the mark we measure our lives by. He is the perfect example of what a human being ought to be. For some people that is good enough where Jesus is concerned. He is the absolute standard. He is the ultimate role model for humanity. He is humanity at its finest.

**BUT FOR MOST OF US, JESUS IS MORE THAN THE BEST THAT HUMANITY CAN PRODUCE. JESUS IS ALSO THE BEST REPRESENTATION OF WHAT GOD IS LIKE.**

When a little boy was asked to describe Jesus, he thought for a moment and then replied, “Jesus is the best picture God ever had taken.” I like that.

Author and former Divinity School professor John Killinger explained Christ’s role in another way. “Jesus,” he said, “is God’s way of getting rid of a bad reputation.”

Humanity had many ideas and intuitions about the nature of God prior to the coming of Jesus. But even the most brilliant theologian was a blind man trying to describe an elephant. How could any mortal capture the essence of the Divine Other? It was beyond the capacity of the human brain.

Even more critically, bad descriptions of who God is have caused persons to perform outrageous rituals such as infant sacrifice, temple prostitution and the slaughter of unbelievers (a practice that is still carried on in parts of the world today, as you know).

Bad ideas of God always produce correspondingly bad behavior. If someone says to you, “Oh, it doesn’t matter what you believe, just as long as you are sincere,” ask them to consider those armies, even in the world today, who send children out to be slaughtered in battle so that these children can supposedly go to heaven. It does matter what we believe about God! Because we could not climb up to God, God reached down to us in Jesus of Nazareth. He is the revelation of what God is really like.

I’m reminded of the final scene from the movie Shrek. In case you haven’t seen the movie, Shrek is the story of an ogre, a big, fat, green ogre who rescues the Princess Fiona. Fiona is a beautiful creature who bears a striking resemblance to Cameron Diaz with red hair.

However, Princess Fiona is under a curse. Every night, she becomes an ogre, every bit as green and fat as Shrek. Every day, she becomes Cameron Diaz with red hair again. This cycle is to repeat itself until, in classic fairy tale fashion, she finally experiences true love.

At the end of the movie, Shrek finally sees for the first time Fiona’s ogre persona (she had been hiding it from him). But he loves her and kisses her anyway. And then something quite unexpected happens, something that never happens in traditional fairy tales. Rather than being transformed back into the beautiful Cameron Diaz-like princess, Fiona is permanently transformed into a fat, green ogre. She loves Shrek so much that she gives up her former beauty and becomes like him.

And that, of course, is what God does for us in Jesus Christ! Out of His great love for us, God empties Himself and becomes as we are.

Who is this man Jesus? He is the ultimate role model for humanity. He is humanity at its finest. Yes, but much more than that — Jesus is also the best representation of what God is like. Jesus is, in a way we can't fully explain, both fully God and fully man. As the little boy said, "Jesus is the best picture God ever had taken."

"Who do you say that the Son of Man is?" asked Jesus. And, for once, Simon Peter got it right, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

But let me ask you, "Who is Jesus Christ to you — and what difference does that make in how you live your life?"

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