

“The Question of Personal Identity” ~ Luke 2.39-52
January 13, 2019 ~ Mercy Hill Church ~ Pastor John Ferguson

Inscribed on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi is the ancient Greek maxim, “Know yourself.” It’s at once intriguing and perplexing. It has set many on a journey to discover the core of who they are and driven others to despair.

But it begs the question: “Why do we not know ourselves?” If the question is asked us, “Who are you?”, we usually answer the question by talking about what we do.

- Walker Percy’s Lost in the Cosmos, “Why it is that of all the billions and billions of strange objects in the cosmos—novas, quasars, pulsars, black holes—you are beyond doubt the strangest?”

We all know what it’s like to try to discover who we are—who we really are—, to try find our place in this world, to search for an identity and to connect with something larger than ourselves.

And believe it or not, that’s part of the reason you and I need to hear not only what Jesus has to say about this, but to understand who Jesus is as well. And that’s one of the reasons we are studying together the Good News (Gospel) of Jesus according to Luke.

We all know that Jesus was an amazing person. But have you ever wondered what he was like as a boy? Have you ever stopped and asked the question, “At what point did Jesus understand who he was? When did he sense the call of God upon his life and his unique relationship to God as His heavenly Father? When did he realize that part of the mission of his life was to die for the sins of the world?” These are fascinating questions to ponder.

That’s why I want to invite you to listen in with me as Luke tells us about an fascinating event from the life of Jesus which caused his parents to freak out. But in this event, Luke records two questions from the mouth of the twelve year old Jesus that gives us strategic insight into Jesus understanding of himself and his own identity, and if we’re careful to understand what he says, we’ll find a key insight that will help us to not only define ourselves, but to know our identity as well.

“The Question of Personal Identity” ~ Luke 2:39-52

39 And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. **40** And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him... **52** And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.

With these two stories serving as bookends to the only information we have about the boyhood of Jesus, Luke brackets some vital information he wants us to know. By the way, Luke almost certainly got this information first hand from Mary, because of something we learn about her in this account as well.

Ryken 107, “Of all the things that happened during his boyhood years, this was the one that most clearly declared his destiny.”

41 Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. **42** And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom.

1. The Significance of Jesus’ Twelfth Year

- (1) Coming of Age: At age 13, Jewish boys would become men, “a son of the commandment” (later known as bar mitzvah). They would also become full members of the synagogue.
- (2) Intense Training: *The Mishnah* instructed fathers to teach their sons in Passover observance “one or two years before [they come of age] (qtd. in Hughes 99).

2. The Celebration of the Feast of Passover

(1) One of three Feasts that was mandatory for males to attend (Pentecost & Tabernacles).

(2) Passover was their national celebration of liberation from slavery in Egypt. **Independence Day.**

- This had to have been an amazing time for Jesus. Raised in the backwoods of Israel in an insignificant town of Nazareth where nothing much happened, going to Jerusalem had to have been the highlight of the year. The capital of Jerusalem would be crammed with some two hundred thousand pilgrims. As Jesus walked the streets, he would have seen Jews from all over the Roman Empire speaking with accents, telling stories, and sharing news from far off places. He would have seen the ever present Roman soldiers on edge and on the look out for stirrings of political revolutions. Jesus would meet all kinds of people, feasted with his best friends, sung the songs of Zion and prayed at the Temple which was one of the wonders of the ancient world. And it all climaxed in a Feast in which the head of the household would tell the old, old story of God's love for his people, demonstrated in their liberation from slavery in Egypt under the leadership of Moses. As the oldest son, Jesus would have been given the question of asking his father, "Why is this night different from all other nights?"

So this was a huge year for Jesus. And it would also become a defining year for Jesus because of what happens next.

43 And when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, **44** but supposing him to be in the group they went a day's journey, but then they began to search for him among their relatives and acquaintances, **45** and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, searching for him.

1. The Dawning Realization: Imagine the Panic

- Geldenhus, "It was the custom in those days that when a company of festival pilgrims went on their return-journey the women went on ahead with the younger children and the men followed. The bigger boys then traveled either along with their father or with their mothers. Joseph, therefore may have thought, when he did not notice Jesus, that He was with Mary, and Mary probably thought that He was with Joseph" (126, Ryken 108).

2. The Desperate Search: Imagine the Tension

- We can imagine the panic that set in as they realized that Jesus was not with any of their friends and family in the caravan. Moreover, it would have been too dangerous to travel at night so they would probably have waited until the morning. So day 1 involved traveling away from Jerusalem. Day 2 would have involved the travel back to Jerusalem at first light, and the search would have begun. At Day 3 they found Jesus in the Temple.

46 After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. **47** And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.

1. Here Luke tells us that they found in him the temple, but before he tells us of their reunion, he wants to highlight a few significant details for us.

- (1) Jesus was (1) sitting among the teachers of the law, (2) listening& (3) asking them questions.
(2) Jesus was already amazing people at his understanding of the law (Israel's story) and his answers.

2. Now we know that as an adult, people were blown away at the teaching of Jesus. Cf. 4:22, "And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth." But even know,

as a 12 year old, Luke makes sure we know that there is something unusual about Jesus. The experts were utterly amazed at Jesus' understanding and answers to their questions.

48 And when his parents saw him, they were astonished. And his mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress."

- No one can fault Mary for her response which was a mixture of relief + frustration + exasperation.
- But Jesus didn't understand it; he was likewise astonished, so he respectfully asks her a few questions.

49 And he said to them, "**Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?**"

1. Red Letter Words: These are the first recorded words of Jesus. These words are at once arresting, intriguing, and full of relevance for not only understanding who Jesus is, but also his relevance for each of our lives.

- Jesus seemed surprised they didn't know where he was. "It was just so obvious that he was frankly amazed that his parents didn't know where to find him" (Ryken 111).

2. Insightful Words: "What the boy Jesus said was monumental in what it revealed about his true identity as the Son of God and revolutionary in its implications for our own relationship to God as our Father" (Ryken, 110).

(1) Jesus' use of the phrase, "My Father..." was utterly unique. No one had used this before. Not Moses. Not David. Not the great prophets like Isaiah or Jeremiah.

- The OT describes God as "Father" some 14x, almost always in relationship to the nation of Israel. No one spoke of God as "my Father." That would be too...intimate. Some might say 'arrogant.'

(2) Already, at the age of 12, Jesus understood something of his unique identity as the Son of God because of his unique relationship with God: he called him, "My Father."

- Because Jesus knew God as his own personal Heavenly Father, Jesus knew who he himself was.

(3) Literally, Jesus said, "Did you not know that I had to be in the things of my Father?" It makes sense for translators to add the word "house" which refers to the Temple. But Jesus said something very specific that we need to grasp: even at this early age, Jesus knew his mission was aligned with the things of God:

- Notice Jesus' sense of obligation: "I **must** be about my Father's business." It was a matter of divine compulsion. Already, at the age of 12, Jesus sensed being compelled by the Father's business.
- Question: What are the things of God that Jesus found to be both his business and his mission? Answer: 2 Cor. 5:19 (NASB), "... God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them...."

50 And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them. **51** And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart.

1. So Mary and Joseph found Jesus right where he should be. But this didn't make it any easier for them to understand as they were still grappling with the identity of Jesus too, and all that he would mean not only for their future, but for the future of their nation and the world as a whole.

- "Mary treasured up all these things in her heart." Where did Luke get this personal info if not from Mary?

2. **Luke seems to highlight the obedience of Jesus to his parents** because that too is going to come into play later on as we understand why it could only be Jesus—the only perfect human being to have ever lived—who could go on to lay down his own life on behalf of people like you and me, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Why does the Scriptures contain this passage for us? Why do we need to hear it's message today?

Luke wants us to understand—from the lips of Jesus himself—words that (1) clearly reveal to us Jesus' special relationship to God as his personal heavenly Father, & (2) point to the mission of Jesus' life, which is to be about His Father's business.

Luke wants us to ask, "What does it mean for Jesus to be about his Father's business in my life?"

- Jesus business was all about His Father's business which has everything to do with our business.
- Jesus' interests were all about His Father's interests which have everything to do with our interests.

Bottom Line Jesus' identity was wrapped up in His Father's identity which has everything to do with our identity.

APPLICATION #1: Marvel at the Unique Identity of Jesus

1. Because Jesus knew God as his Heavenly Father, Jesus knew who he himself was too.

- J. Calvin, 1560 French Edition of his *Institutes*, opens with these words, "In knowing God, each of us also knows himself."

2. For Jesus, it was vitally important that others got the question of personal identity right as well.

- Mt. 16:13-17, Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.

3. It's vitally important for us to get the question of the personal identity of Jesus right as well.

- D. Bock, "The world tells us to treat Jesus as one great religious figure among many in history. Luke does not give us that option. Rather, as the unique Son, Jesus has exclusive rights to reveal the way of God, and one either accepts or rejects that revelation. If Jesus says he is the way (John 14:6), then either he is or he is not; there are no other options.... Jesus does not leave the world the option of merely ranking him among the religious greats of history. He is either much more or much less. Luke's gospel is committed to showing he is much more."

APPLICATION #2: Receive the Gift of Adoption from Jesus

The rest of the New Testament helps us to understand the significance of Jesus Sonship for us.

1. John 1:11-12, "He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."

- And because of Jesus' unique relationship with his Father, Jesus can introduce us to him as well. And not only does he do that, but he makes that access possible. And not only does he make that access possible, he gives us a new relationship with God like his, so that we too can become sons and daughters of God.

- 1 John 3:1, “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.”
- Because of Jesus, we can know call the Creator God but the personal name of “my Father.”
- JI Packer, “ ‘Father’ is the Christian name for God.”

2. Mark 14:36, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you.”

- Galatians 4:6, “And because you are son, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father”

For the Christian, identity is not something we achieve, it’s something we receive.

Conclusion:

So who are you?

- Jesus lived and died and rose again from the dead, to grant people like you and me, who simply entrust ourselves and our destiny to him, an identity that is far, far more precious than anything we could establish on our own—namely, the identity of a loved and cherished child of the heavenly Father.
- *CS Lewis, Mere Christianity*, “Your real, new self...will not come as long as you are looking for it. It will come when you are looking for Him.... Look for Christ, and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in.”
- So who are you? If we’re tracking with Luke in his gospel, by faith in Jesus we can say, “Because of the kindness and grace of Jesus, I am a Christian, and I am a child a daughter of God!”

**May you marvel at the unique identity of Jesus
and receive the gift of adoption from him
by which you are graced to address
the creator of all by the intimate term,
“my Father.”**