

**"I Believe in Jesus Christ, God's Only Son, Our Lord"**

**Sermon Series on the Apostles' Creed: #5**

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**(Mt. 16:13-20)**

**Introduction.**

Have you noticed just how much Jesus dominates the Apostles' Creed? In just ninety words the Apostle's Creed sums up the content of historic Christian belief in a Triune God. Twelve words refer to the God the Father, four words refer to the God Holy Spirit, but seventy-two of the words refer to God the Son. Jesus is the focus and the fullness of our faith as Christians.

British theologian J.I. Packer put it this way, "When [the Apostles' Creed] called God 'maker of heaven and earth', it parted company with Hinduism and Eastern faiths in general. Now, by calling Jesus Christ God's only Son, it parts company with Judaism and Islam and stands quite alone. This claim for Jesus is both the touchstone of Christianity and the ingredient that makes it unique. As the whole New Testament was written to make and justify the claim, we should not be surprised to find the Creed stating it with fuller detail than anything else."<sup>1</sup>

This morning we consider the phrase "I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord."

**I. He is called Jesus.**

To most of us, Jesus is a sacred name, and few of us would think of naming our children Jesus. But in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD it was one of the most common names of all, and many children were actually named Jesus. It's the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua, or Yeshua, and the name means "The Lord saves." You'll recall that an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him to give the boy the name Jesus "*because He will save His people from their sins*" (Mt. 1:21).

Jesus was a real human being. He was a historical figure. The Bible tells us that, but so do secular historians who lived in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. That may not seem very significant to you, but in reality it carries a great deal of weight. Because, you see, there have been people through the centuries who have tried to emphasize the deity of Jesus at the expense of His humanity. But the Apostles' Creed says that Jesus was fully human as well as being divine.

The NT includes numerous references to the physical, mental, and emotional condition of Jesus. He came into the world like all babies do with all the pain and

mess associated with childbirth. He grew up in a home with parents and siblings like all of us. In the course of His life He became tired, hungry, and thirsty, just like everyone.

He also experienced the range of emotions that all of us do from time to time. The Bible says that Jesus was troubled in His spirit, that He marveled at the faith of the centurion, and that He wept at the death of His friend Lazarus. The author of the letter to the Hebrews says it well when he writes, "*[In Jesus] we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet without sin. Therefore, let us draw near to the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need*" (Heb. 4:15,16).

Jesus was a real person who lived and died. Those are the historical facts, accurate and true. But as we read the NT, more is revealed to us about who Jesus was, what He did, and why He had such a powerful impact upon people. And that leads us to the second point I want you to consider today.

## **II. He Is Called Christ.**

The name *Christ* is not a surname like Barnes, Carlan, or Dodds. Rather, it's the title Jesus holds, and it identifies Him as the appointed savior-king for whom the Jews had been waiting for centuries. The word *Christos* is the Greek form of the Hebrew word for *Messiah*, and it literally means "anointed one."

In the OT there were three kinds of people who were anointed as an evidence of their office: prophets, priests, and kings. A prophet was someone who was anointed to speak to humanity for God. A priest was someone who was anointed to speak to God for humanity. And a king was someone who was anointed to serve as a shepherd of the people. He was supposed to lead, guide, and govern the people in the ways of God. The Messiah was the long-awaited deliverer who had been promised by the prophets throughout the history of Israel, and he was to serve as prophet, priest, and king for God's chosen people. The Messiah was *the* central figure in Jewish thought, and they longed for His appearing.

In the passage in Matthew 16 we have read this morning, we see that as Jesus and His disciples traveled from Bethsaida to the villages around Caesarea Philippi, He asked them a question, "*Who do people say that I am?*" The disciples gave a variety of answers to the question and echoed the rumors they had heard. Some said He was John the Baptist come back from the dead. Others said He was Elijah, the prophet in the OT. Still others thought that He was one of those in the tradition of the prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

And then the Lord asked them the most important question of all, "*What about you? Who do you say that I am?*" With spiritual insight beyond his own ability to fully understand what he was saying, Peter spoke up and said, "*You are the Christ,*

*the Son of the living God.*" Peter identified Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah for whom the Jews had been looking for centuries, and he recognized in Jesus the qualities and characteristics of the anointed one. He believed that Jesus had come to deliver the people.

Jesus was the prophet Moses predicted would come to speak God's word. He was the priest who, in ways Aaron could only imagine, would serve as the sacrificial Lamb of God who came to take away the sins of the world. And Jesus was the king whose throne would be for all eternity, whose reign would never end. All this is wrapped in the title Christ.

### **III. He Is Called God's Only Son.**

Peter's bold confession in Matthew 16 also claimed that Jesus was not only the Christ, but also the Son of the living God – not *a* son, but *the* Son of God. Elsewhere in the gospels we read of this affirmation from God the Father Himself – at Jesus' baptism in Matthew 3, and at the Transfiguration in Matthew 17, when the Father said, "*This is My Son, whom I love, listen to Him.*"

When we say, "I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son," it seems that the little word *only* is perhaps superfluous, like it's just there for padding. But nothing could be further from the truth. On many occasions in Scripture, Jesus is described as God's only *begotten* Son. When we hear that phrase, it's easy to mistakenly think that Jesus, therefore, must have been born from God, or that He was created by God like the rest of the world. That is the mistaken notion of Islam and the Jehovah's Witnesses. But the truth of the matter is that the word *begotten* doesn't refer to Jesus as the offspring of God. Rather, it refers to the eternal and personal relationship between God the Father and God the Son.

The word that is translated *begotten* in Scripture is the Greek word *monogenas*. *Mono* means "one," as in the word "monologue" where one person is doing the talking, and *genas*, from which we get our English words "genes" and "gender," means "of the same kind" or "of the same nature." In other words, *monogenas* literally means "one of a kind."

So, when we say that Jesus is the only begotten Son of God, we're not saying that He came from God, or that He was created by God. Just the opposite. We're saying that Jesus, God the Son, is the same kind, the same nature, and the same essence as God the Father. This is the mysterious doctrine of the Trinity, that there is one God, but He exists eternally in three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

How is it that possible? How can God exist eternally as God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? It's a mystery, and I don't think anyone can fully explain it. But it's one of the central beliefs of the Christian faith. Athanasius, the great church father of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, once said this during a controversy when the church tried

to clear up this matter of the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. He said, "As the spring is not the stream, so the stream is not the spring. And yet both contain the same water which flows from the spring into the stream. Even so the deity passes on from the Father to the Son without separation."<sup>2</sup>

Make no mistake about it, by ascribing to Himself a unique relationship with God the Father, Jesus was claiming to be God. That was the reason the Jewish authorities wanted to put Him to death. It was for the cause of blasphemy – that He claimed to be God. On one occasion the Jews in Temple picked up stones to put Jesus to death, and when the Lord asked them why they wanted to kill Him, they said, "*Because you, being a mere man, claim to be God*" (Jn. 10:33).

There are many people today who believe that Jesus Christ was a great person in history, that He did a lot of good, and that He pointed people to God, but they're not prepared to affirm that Jesus was God Himself. C.S. Lewis once wrote the following in order to counter such a notion:

"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 of 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 w/ any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."<sup>3</sup>

In the Apostles' Creed we affirm that Jesus Christ, who called God His heavenly Father, was in fact God's only Son. This may be the most radical affirmation of the entire Creed.

#### **IV. He Is Called Lord.**

It's difficult to open the OT without coming across the word "Lord" in all caps, because it's used over and over again in Scripture to refer to God. The Lord revealed His personal name *Yahweh* to Moses when He appeared in the burning bush (Ex. 3), but the OT writers were reluctant to refer to God's name directly, because they regarded His name as too holy even to be said out loud.

So, they devised a way of referencing the name *Yahweh* by using a "code word" of four consonants of the name YHWH, and they substituted the vowels for the word *Adonai*, which really means "Lord." And whenever they got to the name YHWH in Scripture, they would instead say *Adonai*, or "the LORD." When the OT Scriptures were translated into Greek, the Greek word *kyrios*, which is translated "the Lord," was used to translate the sacred name of God.

In the NT *kyrios* was used in the same way, and on many occasions the word "Lord" is used to refer to Christ Himself. Sometimes the word was used as little more than a title of respect, like "Sir," but such uses account for a small number of the occurrences of the word in the NT. The vast majority of them refer to Jesus as "*the* Lord." A word that was once used to refer to God came to refer to Jesus, and we see an example of this when doubting Thomas exclaimed, "*My Lord, and my God.*"

The word *Lord* speaks of Jesus' sovereignty, His authority, and His majesty. He is the sovereign King of the universe, and Scripture says that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Him. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords, and the Bible says that one day every knee shall bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

We're called to worship Him on bended knee, and when we do so, we affirm that Jesus Christ is not only *the* Lord, but He is also *our* Lord. And that affirmation makes all the difference in the world, because it takes the statement from an objective declaration of truth to a personal affirmation of faith. And it's that personal affirmation which brings salvation to our souls. The very first and basic baptismal affirmation in the early church was simply, "Jesus Christ is Lord."

### **Conclusion.**

As I close this morning, I want to share with you something I saw during my recent to Italy. In addition to visiting the sites, studying the history, and eating all the wonderful food, it was also a spiritual pilgrimage for me. I asked God to meet me there when I visited all these places we read about in Scripture and in church history. And I was not disappointed. God spoke to me in powerful ways.

One of those moments happened last Thursday when my group visited the Catacombs in Rome just outside the city walls. The Catacombs are where many Christians were buried – tens of thousands of them, including some of the earliest popes and martyrs in the church. There you'll also find artifacts and Christian symbols painted on the walls from the time of the first few centuries. We walked down narrow flights of stairs that led to four different levels of crypts where Christians had once been buried, and at the end of the tour we celebrated communion as a group deep in the heart of the Catacombs with the memory of the saints who had gone before us all around.

At one point on the tour, we came to the place where St. Cecilia was once buried. When archeologists uncovered her crypt, they discovered that she was lying face down in a bent position with her fingers holding a particular pose. On the screens you will see a picture of a marble statue that was craved to replicate the scene. Notice the two fingers on one hand and the one finger on the other. Also notice the line across her neck.

In the first three centuries Christians were persecuted in terrible ways, and we visited the Coliseum where a lot of this persecution took place. In addition, during the reign of several emperors Christians were required to burn incense and say, “Caesar is Lord,” or suffer death by beheading. Rome tried to coerce allegiance to the state.

Our tour guide told us that in the year 230 AD a young woman named Cecilia, who was 17-years-old, was arrested and required to burn the incense in emperor worship and say, “Caesar is Lord.” However, in response she simply held up her fist and then unfolded two fingers one by one and said, “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” And then she held up the index finger on her other hand and said, “One God. Jesus is Lord.” After she said this she bared her neck, and she was beheaded. That’s why there is a line on the statue across her neck.

If you were Cecilia, what would you have done? Would you be willing to die for your belief in Jesus Christ God’s only Son? Would you profess loyalty only to Him as the Lord of your life? If you lived in Egypt where our friend Tharwat ministers, or in Iran where Sasan Tavasoli broadcasts his ministry, would you be willing to suffer persecution and perhaps even die for your belief in the fact that Jesus Christ was God’s only begotten Son?

I was humbled at the thought of what it cost Christians in the past and around the world still today to make this simple affirmation of the Apostle’s Creed. And it made me want to live more fully for Christ and to put my faith into action. And I also thought about Jesus’ question in the gospels when He asked, “*Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and yet don’t do the things I say?*” I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord. Do I? Do you? Then let’s live like we believe it in the coming week. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>J.I. Packer, *I Want To Be A Christian*, pp. 45, 46.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted by Clayton Bell in *Moorings in a World Adrift*, p. 22.

<sup>3</sup>C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 55, 56.