

DEVOTIONS AND PRAYERS

BY

CHAPLAINS

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“The Unavoidable Question”

I would like to thank Speaker Coleman for inviting me to come and share these devotional thoughts with you this morning. I would also like to thank Representative Bob Hanner, my representative, my friend, and a member of the First Baptist Church of Dawson, Georgia, for his part in having me invited as well. Those of us who live in Dawson are always sad when the House is called into session and Bob must leave us. There is perhaps nobody sadder, however, than the owner of the Dawson Huddle House. He is a member of our church and assures me that, for some strange reason, revenues at the Huddle House seem to always take a steep hit whenever the House is in session. You esteemed members of this august body may draw from that whatever conclusions you will, but the owner of the Huddle House asks me to ask you to please send Bobby home as soon as your business is done here. I would also like to thank and honor my parents this morning. Wade and Diane Richardson have traveled over five hours from Sumter, SC, to watch their son give a ten-minute devotional. I love you mom and dad and I honor you this morning.

You have no doubt, since the convening of this session of the House, been filling your days with the consideration and answering of questions. It grieves me therefore to add to your workload, but as a member of that two-millennia-old counter-cultural movement known as Christianity, and as a follower of the One we call Jesus, I am compelled to place before you yet two more questions.

In the sixteenth chapter of Matthew, Jesus asks a general question and then moves to a more particular one. The first question is this: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” After answering Jesus by offering a panorama of public opinions about Him, Jesus asks: “But who do *you* say that I am?”

I would like to make a few observations this morning about these questions:

Observation #1: When it comes to our opinion of Jesus, we cannot hide behind opinion polls forever. I know relatively little of the “ins and outs” of your work here, but I know enough to know the great opportunity for evasiveness which opinion polls must afford you. It is always comforting to speak of one’s

constituents. “Well, the people feel this way. The voters prefer that. My district would like this.” This is all fine and good, as far as it goes, but let us note that Jesus has afforded us no such luxury when it comes to what we think of Him. In His pronominal movement from the general to the particular (from “Who do *they* say that I am?” to “Who do *you* say that I am?”) Jesus is rather brusquely snatching our hiding place away from us. The discomfort the disciples felt at this must have been as palpable as our discomfort is today. There will be no Zogby polls in the celestial city. There will be no elusive generalizations. There will be no appeals to the electorate. There will be only the naked soul before the personal Lord who asks, “Who do *you* say that I am?”

Observation #2: This question (“Who do you say that I am?”) is that question on which all of life hinges. When stumbling, stumbling Peter finally hits a home run and proclaims, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!”, Jesus immediately begins speaking of cosmic themes: eternal blessings, the revealing Father in Heaven, the founding of the Church, the destruction of Hell, the keys of the kingdom, and that earthly binding and loosening which shall be honored in the heavenlies. It is as if Peter’s answer unleashed in Jesus a song of praise. When we speak of generalities about Jesus (“Well, others say this about you!”), nothing happens, but when we dare to breathe that most scandalous answer ourselves (“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!”)...then, ahhh! Heaven sings and Hell crumbles and the Church is born anew. I dare say that you will not consider a question in this session which approaches in importance this question of old: “Who do you say that I am?” It is key. It is the grand interrogative of the cosmos. It simply must be approached and dealt with.

And finally, **Observation #3:** It is the only lasting question. I have often felt that the only thing separating Baptist preachers and politicians was the quality of their suits. I have a Methodist uncle who tells me that you can put a Baptist preacher in a \$2,000 suit and it will still look like it came from JCPenney. Be that as it may, our temptations are very similar: to please our people instead of doing what is right, to betray our principles in order to have job security, and, perhaps most damaging, to spend our lives immersed in insignificant things. This is, admittedly, part of the package. We must operate in the theater of the mundane, it is true, but must we avoid first things, bedrock issues?

It strikes me that this question is one of those first things. In truth, the Christian Church has always maintained, even when, in an age of pluralism and

latitudinarianism it has long since stopped being fashionable to do so, that this question is the only question that really matters. This will sound strange to some of you. It will sound hard and narrow and utterly out of sync with our current cultural proclivity for syncretism and compromise, but the Christian Church has always obstinately felt that there was something singular about this question, "Who do you say that I am?" If you are tempted to protest allow me to point out that Jesus has never claimed to be a part of our culture of relativism and epistemological uncertainty. Jesus was not plagued with our own national insecurity about answers. In fact, He seems to have felt that we *could* answer this question and that that answer was of eternal significance.

When Jesus rejoices at Peter's answer and proclaims that Hell's gates shall not stand against such a confession and such a people who bind themselves to it, He is really saying to all of us. Throughout time and space, that there is a question which resounds throughout the ages, which confronts humanity ever and again in all ages, which cannot be whittled away or tucked in a drawer, which cannot be sidestepped by appeals to the people's opinions, and which cannot be dealt away to a committee in hopes that it will die in the process. It is the question for the ages. It is the question for you. And, as a representative of that Kingdom, I call it to your attention. Find some time to ponder it and find the courage to answer it. "Who do you say that I am?"

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