

## Learning from a Coaching Pro...A Coaching Lesson from Jesus

By Dr. Merlin Switzer

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As a leader or coach, does it excite you when people get it...when they are finally able to connect the dots? It does me! It's like, "Hurray...Yes!" What if you were more effective at helping people get it? Are you interested in learning from a pro? If so, this article contains insights from Coach Jesus you won't want to miss. Was Jesus a coach? Why did he ask questions? How did Jesus use questions? These questions and others are answered in this article.

In our quest to learn from Coach Jesus, we will focus on Matthew 16:13-20 where Jesus asks a powerful question, "Who do you say I am?" In order to better understand the context, let's start with some background and then move on to the passage.

### Background

Recall that in Matthew 14:13-21 and 15: 29-39 Jesus' miraculously feeds multitudes of people. Jesus then has an encounter with the Pharisees and Sadducees who demand a miracle, but Jesus refuses.

Jesus and the disciples cross the Sea of Galilee and he warns the disciples to "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Mt 16:6)." The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, so they wondered if Jesus was referring to this.

Jesus responds by asking them a series of five questions aimed at invoking their senses to understand what he had done and, that if he could feed these multitudes, he could provide bread for them. They realized he was encouraging them to be on guard "against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Mt 16:12)."

### Who Do You Say I Am?

Upon arriving in Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" After they respond, Jesus then asks this powerful question, "But what about you? Who do you say I am (Mt 16:15)?" This was a "stake-in-the-ground" question that caused them to reflect on all that they had seen him do, all that he had shared with them, and their very relationship with him.

Peter responds, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Wow...Peter, you got it. We get this sense when Jesus replies, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed

to you by man, but by my Father in Heaven (Mt 16:17).” Jesus’ words are affirming and supportive of Peter’s response.

Was Jesus coaching his disciples? *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* defines a disciple as, “a follower of a particular person.” The disciples followed Jesus, because they wanted to learn from him. When Jesus called Peter and Andrew, he said, “Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men (Mt 4:19).”<sup>1</sup> Inherent in this call is an understanding that they would learn from him.

Coaching is a learning process. The Center for Coaching and Mentoring defines coaching as, “A discussion process...aimed at exerting a positive influence in the motivation, performance and awareness of areas for improvement and development of another person to help them be as effective as possible.”

The disciples needed to know who Jesus was, otherwise how could they fulfill the challenge of the Great Commission recorded in Matthew 28:18-20. He was coaching them for a special purpose that required transformation from the inside out. Tom Wymore in his article, “Coaching: Unleashing the Power of Discovery,” identifies this passage as a clear example of Jesus coaching.

### **Jesus Used Questions**

Why Did Jesus Ask Questions? Karen Lee-Thorp in *How to Ask Great Questions* writes, “Jesus’ questions...made people think for themselves and examine their hearts.” Tony Stoltzfus builds on this in *Coaching Questions* when he says, “Asking moves us beyond passive acceptance of what others say, or staying stuck in present circumstances, to aggressively applying our creative ability to the problem.” This question forced the disciples to dig deep in thinking about who He was, allowing new insights that would transform their lives.

Asking questions are essential tools of coaches. Stoltzfus says there are two different types of questions, open and closed. Closed questions are those that are generally answered with a “yes” or “no.” Open questions “keep the client in charge” and can’t be answered with a “yes” or “no.” Jesus used an open question in this instance.

Jesus used questions frequently. In the Gospel of Mark Jesus asked sixty-five questions. Forty-two (65%) are open questions. The Franciscan Priest Richard Rohr (*Third Way*, Summer 2006, Vol 29 No 6, page 27) says Jesus asked 307 questions in the four Gospels.

Jesus used questions for various purposes. According to Lee-Thorp, “Jesus’ questions were simple, clear, never condescending, always provocative... (and) were always fresh and attuned to the unique needs of the people He was talking to.” This implies that Jesus asked questions with intent, considering the situation and needs of the other person. Here, He was probing and

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture references are from the *NIV*.

direct. Notice how the questions in this passage progresses from general, “Who do people say,” to specific, “Who do you say I am?”

Jesus’ response to Peter reveals that God the Father was working behind the scenes...speaking to Peter’s heart. In *Leadership Coaching*, Stoltzfus beautifully captures the relationship between coaching and faith when he writes, “If I have the faith to coach a person, I believe that I can take my hands off that individual’s life and God will step in and do something incredible.” It also implies that coaches look to God for direction when coaching.

## **Disciples Transformed**

Tom Crane in *The Heart of Coaching* uses the term “transformation coaching” to acknowledge the “huge, sweeping change” that can take place in the life of the coachee as a result of coaching. We see this transformation in the disciples as they go from fishermen on the Sea of Galilee to apostles leading the church. This passage records a significant instance of coaching in their transformation.

Others recognized this transformation. In Acts 4, Peter and Paul are standing before the religious leaders in Jerusalem. Peter has just finished speaking to them. Verse 13 reads, “When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.” Wow, there’s transformation. Jesus had coached them well!

A key part of Jesus’ coaching of the disciples was the authentic relationship he had with them. Tony Stoltzfus in *Leadership Coaching* writes, “Coaching is relationship-based. The power of coaching to change lives comes from the belief, trust, and support that flow through the transparent bond between coach and client.” Jesus had a relationship with them that was real, authentic, and communicated his belief in and love for them. This is evident in Jesus’ response to Peter, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven (Mt 16:19).”

## **Conclusion**

We can learn much from Coach Jesus. He had an authentic relationship with his coachees. He primarily used open, direct, probing questions. He was supportive of his coachees and acknowledged that God the Father was working with Him in the lives of His coachees. Pause and consider, “What would Coach Jesus have you learn from Him?”

## Bio

Dr. Merlin Switzer works exclusively in the field of leadership. He holds a Doctor of Strategic Leadership with an emphasis in Leadership Coaching. Dr. Switzer is a leadership coach, consultant, trainer, and conference speaker. He has worked with numerous leaders and organizations across the U.S. to help leaders be more effective. More recently, he has worked with leaders in Ecuador and Cambodia.

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