As we return to John 12, you might recall that Jesus has made some powerful statements regarding “His hour” that is now at hand. His declaration began in vs. 23 when He said, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” And His declaration concluded in our passage from last week in vss. 31-32 when He said: 31 Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. 32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

Clearly this hour marks the defining action of Jesus’ life, right? NOW will the Son of Man be glorified. NOW is the judgment of the world. NOW will the ruler of this world be cast out. And how will all of this be accomplished? Jesus looks to the hill called Golgotha and He says in vs. 32, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

We unpacked those verses last Sunday and I encourage you to go back and consider that message if you have not already, but this morning let us consider the response of the first century listeners and contemplate the profound question that they pose in John 12:34.

So the crowd answered him, “We have heard from the Law that the Christ remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?”

Church, let us be grateful when those in the first century ask such great questions…questions that many continue to ask to this day. Thus, I will devote my entire message this morning to this question: Who Is This Son of Man? My message will fall under three subtitles: 1) The Historical Context of the Son of Man; 2) Three Ways Jesus Defined Himself as The Son of Man; and 3) Why It Matters.

I. The Historical Context of the Son of Man

How many of you have ever wondered why Jesus constantly refers to Himself as “the Son of Man” in the four gospels? If you are anything like me, you probably just assumed He had a good reason, that it had something to do with the Old Testament, and you didn’t really see any problem with it since Jesus was actually born of a woman…so yes, He is a “son of man.” That’s generally how I thought about our Lord’s use of this title when I was a young person. However, as I grew older and more interested in the Bible, I had other questions. For example: why wouldn’t Jesus call Himself “The Son of God?” Doesn’t that make more sense and give Him more authority? If Jesus was the Messiah, why not call Himself the Messiah, or the Christ? John the Baptist called Him the “the Lamb of God”…the crowds on the road into Jerusalem hailed Him as a King…why not use those titles? Jesus could have identified Himself in numerous ways, but almost exclusively He refers to Himself as “the Son of Man.” In fact, this title occurs sixty-nine times in the synoptic gospels and twelve times in the gospel of John. Why is that?

Like many of you, I have often connected the dots back to Daniel 7:13-14 where we read these words:

13 “I saw in the night visions,
and behold, with the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.
14 And to him was given dominion
and glory and a kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him;
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
which shall not pass away,
and his kingdom one
that shall not be destroyed.

That apocalyptic vision sounds like it would be referring to God’s anointed One, the Messiah…which is Jesus, right? Even in that text, however, the reference is to “one like a son of man,” not THE son of man; but, I concluded then, and still believe to this day, that Jesus is somehow associating Himself with the “one like a son of man” in Daniel 7 when He refers to Himself as “the Son of Man.”

I also noted that God regularly refers to the prophet Ezekiel as “son of man,” so for some time I wondered if, perhaps, “son of man” was also a general title for God’s chosen prophets…of which Jesus would certainly qualify, amongst other things.

The truth is, there is quite a bit of mystery surrounding this title that Jesus chose for Himself. Many articles, sermons and books have been written about this subject, and there is much to consider.

First, allow me to geek out here for a bit as we consider this phrase “the son of man” in the original languages.

The phrase “son of man” in the Greek that we find here in John’s gospel comes from the Greek words, *huios tou anthropou*, which of course means literally, “son of man” or “son of the man.” But we need to dig deeper and consider the earlier Aramaic and Hebrew constructions. In the original Aramaic language (the language most likely spoken by Jesus Himself), the phrase is *barnasha*. *Bar* is son, and *nasha* is man. In the Hebrew, the phrase is *ben-ish* or *ben-adam*. Again, *ben* means son, and *ish/adam* means man. You will recognize the use of bar and ben in many biblical names: Barnabas, Barabbas, Benjamin, Benhadad, Benammi. All of these names begin with, “son of…”

Now, here’s what’s interesting. In the ancient context, both in Hebrew and in Aramaic, the use of *ben* or *bar* was often employed in a figurative sense, so that the word following it designated the classification to which one belongs. For example, if you were going to call someone a liar, you would call them “son of a liar” or “son of a lie.” If you were referring to a wealthy man, you might refer to them as “son of wealth.” If you were going to refer to someone who was an excellent marksman, you might refer to that person as a “son of a gun” never mind…you get the point! So…keeping that figurative use of the language in mind, “son of man” could simply mean, “man.” And placing the definite article before the phrase might suggest Jesus referred to Himself as THE MAN! I kind of like that translation…Jesus is definitely THE MAN in my
book; but more likely, Jesus adopted the title to emphasize the classification that he wished to be associated with...i.e. He is one of us...He is human...He is a man. That leads me to my second subheading:

II. Three Ways Jesus Defines Himself as the Son of Man

Even more important than understanding the historical context of the phrase “son of man” is discovering what Jesus revealed about Himself when He applied this title to Himself.

There are at least three ways that Jesus defines Himself in utilizing the title “Son of Man”: 1) He identifies with us; 2) He distinguishes Himself from us; and 3) He establishes Himself over us.

1) First, Jesus identifies Himself with us when He refers to Himself as “the Son of Man.” In the most winsome and humble sense, Jesus chooses a title that says in no uncertain terms, “I am with you...as one of you.” None of the heavenly beings...not God the Father, nor the Holy Spirit, nor any of the angelic host could ever refer to themselves as “Son of Man.” Jesus comes to us as one of us...it is the brilliance and the blessing of the incarnation. John writes, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Paul articulates the wonder of the incarnation in Philippians 2, speaking of Jesus this way:

...though he was in the form of God, [he] did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being found in the likeness of men...

Jesus has come to us in our likeness...He is fully human...and He understands. Consider Luke 9:58 when Jesus says, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”

Jesus not only identifies with the hardships of humanity as Man, but He is relating with the uniqueness of our human hardships even as compared to the lesser creatures. Foxes can sleep anywhere they can dig a hole. Birds can rest anywhere they can find a branch. Animals are perfectly at home in the world, but humans are not. We need to build homes to protect ourselves from the elements. We are cursed to wander this world with longings that will go unmet until we leave this world and find our true home in the One who created us to live in perfect harmony with Himself. Jesus gets it...He is one of us...He knows what it means to be a stranger in a strange land...to experience hardships, poverty, rejection, isolation, and alienation.

Jesus said: The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Church, do you hear what our Lord is saying? Jesus came amongst us, as one of us...doing what we do...eating, drinking, associating with the salt of the earth, and He was falsely accused—He was accused of being a drunkard and a glutton. Is there anything more common to the human experience than eating, drinking, making friends, and being totally misunderstood?!? But this much Jesus did not apologize for: as the Son of Man, He came to be with us...He came to be a friend to sinners. Which means that as the Son of Man, He was disarming, approachable, enjoyable, relatable, fun to be with...a true friend. And He came to help us.
Jesus said, “…the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Jesus reveals His loving heart in His selfless commitment to serve, to give up His life to save those who cannot save themselves. He is not just our friend, but the very best of friends. There is not a selfish bone in Him. He is faithful to the end. To know Him is to love Him, because to know Him is to know…in the deepest way that a human can know anything…that He LOVES us more than any other. He loves us as though we were the only person in the world…such that we are both worth living for and dying for, amen?

Will we ever be able to grasp the beauty of His condescension? This name that He chose for himself…the Son of Man…says it all. Maclaren writes:

Is it not beautiful, and does it not speak to us touchingly and sweetly of our Lord’s earnest desire to get very near us and to bring us very near to Him, that this name, which emphasizes humiliation and weakness and the likeness to ourselves, should be the name that is always upon His lips? Just as, if I may compare great things with small, some teacher or philanthropist, that went away from civilized into savage life, might leave behind him the name by which he was known in Europe, and adopt some barbarous designation that was significant in the language of the savage tribe to whom he was sent, and say to them: That is my name now, call me by that,’ so this great Leader of our souls, who has landed upon our coasts with His hands full of blessings, His heart full of love, has taken a name that makes Him one of ourselves, and is never wearied of speaking to our hearts, and telling us that it is that by which He chooses to be known. It is a touch of the same infinite condescension which prompted Him coming, that makes Him choose as His favorite and habitual designation the name of weakness and identification, the name of ‘Son of Man.’

2) Now, let us consider that in addition to identifying with us, we also observe that in taking the title of the Son of Man, Jesus distinguishes Himself from us!

Now, I know that initially this seems contradictory to the first point, but it’s not. Consider for a moment how preposterous it would be for an average human being to insist on calling himself, “the Son of Man.” As if that was supposed to somehow clear up a possible misunderstanding! I find it ironic every time somebody says to me, “I’m a good person…I’m not perfect, but I’m a good person.” OH…thanks for clearing that up for me. For a moment there I was mistaking you for PERFECTION! Are you kidding me? Your imperfections are not as subtle as you apparently think they are. Nobody in the room here is under the impression that YOU are perfect…so you telling us that you are not perfect is not only redundant, but evidence that you have a hopeless case of narcissism!

You see my point? The average Joe does not need to emphasize that he is a “son of man.” That is a given. However, Jesus clearly felt that there was a need to clarify that He was “the Son of Man” so as not to be equated with a god disguised in human flesh…or an angel…or someone who was incapable of relating with man’s nature and pain. Why would Jesus need to make such a qualification if not for the obvious reason that Jesus was not just “a son of man,” but “THE son of man!” He is not just one of us, but He is the BEST of us. In Jesus we see not only a human being, but the PERFECT human life. Maclaren writes:

When He says ‘the Son of Man,’ He seems to declare that in Himself there are gathered up all the qualities that constitute humanity; that He is, to use modern language, the realized Ideal of manhood…in whom is everything that belongs to manhood, who stands forth as complete and perfect.
How is it that Jesus of Nazareth is the realized Ideal of manhood? We learn in John’s prologue that Jesus, the Son of Man, came from Heaven…He was with God in the beginning, right? Then, in John 3 we hear Jesus say, “No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.” In John 6 Jesus asks, “What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?”

Jesus is one of us; but He’s unique and distinct from all of us. He is the Son of Man, and that unique relationship with God and humanity positions Jesus to be that which we individually and collectively need for life, light, and salvation. Jesus places Himself squarely between sinful humanity and the Holy Father, and He says in John 14:6 “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me.”

Thus, Jesus will say in John 6:

Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal.

For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. Truly I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.

Not only is Jesus the Son of Man our source of nourishment and life; He is also the only means by which we may be saved. Jesus states:

The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me.

Church, do you get it? Only the perfect human life could stand in the gap between us and the holiness of God. Only the perfect Son of Man could give Himself as a ransom for many. And it is Jesus, THE Son of Man, who even now provides EXACTLY what we need in our times of trial and suffering. Let us now look to the third way Christ reveals Himself through this title:

3) Jesus establishes Himself over us. When Jesus refers to Himself as the Son of Man, He presents Himself as the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Son of Man prophecies. That is to say, He is, in fact, the Son of Man referred to in Daniel 7. He is the Judge; He is the King; He is the Messiah; and for those who have the ears to hear, Jesus makes this very clear.

In Matthew 25:31-35, Jesus describes what is to come, saying: “31 “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. 32 Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 And he
will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. 34 Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,

Notice how Jesus uses both “the Son of Man” and the “the King” to refer to the One who sits on his glorious throne and judges the nations. In Matthew 26 Jesus comforts His disciples with the hope of His ascension and return, saying, “…from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.”

Clearly the Son of Man is the Messiah. He is the Judge. He is God’s Chosen One as the Father proclaims on the Mount of Transfiguration.

But you will notice: Jesus refers to Himself publicly as the Messiah or Christ. He doesn’t call Himself a King, even though that is who He is. Why? Why the Son of Man? And who cares?

That leads me to my third and final subheading:

III. Why It Matters

Remember that our text this morning is based upon the crowd’s confusion about Jesus. The crowds are confused because they have pretty strong associations and assumptions concerning the Messiah. As they state in vs. 43, “We have heard from the law that the Christ remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up?”

The crowd articulates a major problem that exists to this day: if Jesus is the Messiah, why does He suffer on a cross? Why would He submit to such shame? That doesn’t seem to fit with the assumptions we all carry around regarding a powerful, warrior god. Listen: we all want a god who would behave like we would behave if we were god, right? We want a god who will show up in the nick of time by rescuing the innocent and punishing the oppressors. We want a god who opposes those who oppose us. We want a god who will turn a blind eye to our mess but execute justice when it comes to all the bad people in the world. We want a god who agrees with our definition of good and evil, or at least is tolerant when we disagree with him. We want a god who gives us what we want when we want it.

Every generation of humans is inclined to create a god in their own image; even though the scriptures tell us that God created the heavens and the earth, and God created us in HIS own image, right?

The Jews here in John 12 are a perfect example of this tendency. They desired a mighty, military hero whose political dominion would never end. And they found scriptures to support their ideal of the Messiah. They loved to recite scriptures like 2 Samuel 7:12-13; Isaiah 9:7; and especially Daniel 7:14 that spoke of a Messiah whose kingdom would never end. However, they turned a blind eye to scriptures like Isaiah 53 where the Anointed One of God is described as the Suffering Servant, the One who is crushed for our iniquities, numbered amongst the transgressors, and whose soul was poured out to death as an intercession for the transgressors.
The first century Jews, having endured centuries of occupation by Gentile nations, had no place in their imagination for a Messiah who would suffer; who would die like a grain of wheat; or who would be lifted up from the earth on a Roman cross.

Such is likely why Jesus used the mysterious and loaded title of the Son of Man. Jesus needed to define Himself on His own terms. He knew the cross would be an offense to those who carried such nationalistic presumptions about the Messiah. But his use of this title also explains the question asked by the crowd at the end of vs. 43, “Who is this Son of Man?”

In other words, “We don’t recognize this particular kind of Son of Man. He doesn’t meet our expectations; he doesn’t satisfy our nationalistic assumptions. He comes across as weak; shameful; and something other than Divine. He is, to put it bluntly, disappointing.”

Paul said it best in 1 Cor. 1:18: The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Church, be careful that you do not fall into the trap of measuring Jesus by your preconceived notions of divinity; or how you think a god should act; or what a good and loving god would allow you to suffer, or so on. Before long, you will find yourself amongst this crowd, asking the same question, with little interest in hearing the answer. After all, the crowd’s question here in John 12 is a rhetorical one. They are convinced they already know the answer; they are simply expressing their unbelief and their utter rejection of the Son of Man who came to die. It is folly to them…and it will be utter folly to all who expect Jesus to meet their predetermined expectations of a god that we have made in our own image.

Listen Church: If God is God, then God gets to define Himself on His own terms, right? That makes sense. The characters in a book don’t get to define the Author; the Author defines Himself, and He also defines the characters in the book. So it is only right, and reasonable, that we allow Jesus to define Himself, amen? And this is what we know: Jesus chose to define Himself, to refer to Himself, and to present Himself as The Son of Man. I have only touched on the significance of that title, but take this to heart: Jesus did not choose that title arbitrarily. He did not stumble across that title and think it fit. In that descriptor He revealed Truth on His own terms.

And here’s the point: The way Jesus speaks about Himself reveals what is true about God, about heaven and hell, about the end of the world, and about US. You want to get to know yourself? Get to know Jesus. You want to understand the meaning of life? Get to know Jesus. You want to know where we can find hope in this dark hour of history? Get to know Jesus. You want to know how you can be forgiven for all the sin in your life, both now and when you stand before God? Get to know Jesus…the Son of Man…who came to seek and to save the lost.

He is the One who loved us so much that He took on our sin and died in our place. He is humble and lowly in heart, and yet He is the Perfect One. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. And He is coming again to judge the living and the dead. Get to know the Son of Man, and you will not only walk in the Light, you will become Children of the Light…and you will never again
wander alone and lost in the darkness. More on that next Sunday. Let us pray.