

WHAT SORT OF MAN?

“Jesus Christ” is the symbol language of values, standards, and authority for most of the Western world in the realms of ethics, religion, personal virtue, and social responsibility. “Christlikeness” is the standard by which we measure our efforts, our progress, and our principles in these areas.

Many of us would claim that this is not as true today as it was a hundred years ago. We are no longer a “Christian” society, and the influence of Jesus seems to be eroding away, not only for many individuals, but for large segments of our population. But that’s a larger question than I can track. Sometimes influence on the inside grows as influence on the outside wanes. Whatever the truth on such levels, cultural norms go deeper and hang on longer than we sometimes realize. Whatever our personal opinions about the quality of the celebrations, our culture still celebrates Easter and Christmas. Whatever it means to each person, most people in our society can still recite the Lord’s Prayer.

I am not talking about the real Jesus, the person we learn about and watch in the pages of the New Testament. I am talking about the symbol language of “humanity in perfection” which the term “Jesus Christ” represents in Western civilization.

But what if there is a vast gap, as I often try to tell you there is, between the Jesus of the New Testament and the “Christlikeness” of the culture and society all around us? When confronted with a tough decision, a moral choice, or a relational dilemma, many people assume that if we can just discern how “Jesus Christ” would behave in that situation, or how He would want *us* to behave, then we have our solution, our answer. But the presuppositions are huge and false: Always be nice. Always forgive. Always include everybody. Always sacrifice your own purposes and desires and beliefs for the benefit of harmony with others. Always be self-effacing and assume that others are more important than you are yourself.

For vast numbers of people in our time, even those inside the church, the phrase “faith in Jesus Christ” is now so vague that it is essentially meaningless. Of course, it means a great deal to various individuals, but it is devoid of content collectively. It does not convey any particular significance in terms of what it means to be a Christian or to live a Christian Life. When our society calls somebody a “Christian,”

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it has little or nothing to do with how much that person's life has been influenced by the thoughts, the words, the deeds, the principles, and the choices of the Lord of the New Testament. Mother Teresa and Billy Graham come a lot closer to the general meaning of the word "Christian" than Jesus does.

And of course it is all made the more complex because the real Jesus behind the symbolic "Jesus Christ" was faced with many difficult choices, but none of them contained nuclear bombs, the population explosion, the internet, huge corporations, the ecological crisis, open-heart surgery, or the partner you happen to be married to.

As a consequence of these and many other changes in our reality, we look back to the Jesus behind the symbolic "Jesus Christ" and find a great deal that seems to have been muted, twisted, or forgotten. If we want to claim Jesus as our own Lord and Savior, we have to relearn the story with fresh eyes. That sounds suspicious at first, even to me. But the errors we have made in our assumptions about Jesus are too glaring to ignore.

Today's sermon has only one point. I was taught that a sermon should always have three points. I suppose that's so that if you disagree with one of them, you can still hang in for the others. But today's sermon has only one point. I want you to consider one aspect – perhaps I should say one *possible* aspect – of the life of Jesus. We are asking: What kind of man was He? And I am suggesting that you try out this one awareness in your search for Him. I believe it is a very hazardous but extremely important truth about who Jesus really was and what He was actually like. Are you ready?

Jesus turns out to be a man WHO NEVER TRIED TO PLEASE ANYBODY. In a world full of people-pleasers and people who honestly admit that they are codependent, this is a startling and disturbing thing to realize. If you conclude that this is true and if you consider yourself to be one of His followers, then you will also turn out to be more and more the kind of person who never tries to please anybody. That's the rub, is it not? If Jesus is our Lord, then more and more we "follow Him" into the kind of life He lived – and the kind of LIFE He invites us into. If this statement is true of Jesus, that will become a huge change of direction and purpose for most of us, because our culture never pictures Him to be that kind of a man.

This was a staggering new awareness for me, beginning when I was a very young Pastor and so very eager to please everybody.

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I thought that pleasing people would be the key to approval, security, and success. If I could please most of the people most of the time, my career as a Minister would resemble an ever-upward-turning spiral. I could see that happening all around me. The most able of my classmates in seminary were demonstrating how this could work. And so my own career started to follow the same pattern.

But I did not stop praying or studying the New Testament. And along the way I ran into this man who wanted to please God: God alone, and only God. He carried this principle far beyond all normal dimensions, until finally I was forced to conclude that Jesus was so busy pleasing God, He never tried to please anything or anyone else.

By the way, many of my more able classmates fell by the wayside as the years went on. Life in a local church is more difficult for Ministers than most people realize. Moving into bigger churches does not change the dynamics very much. So more and more of my colleagues concluded that there was no such thing as a pleasant life if you stayed a Minister. There was too much controversy and too little purpose in their Ministry. It seemed to them an “empty” life, so they found more promising careers.

Unfortunately I kept running into elements of the real church underneath the surface of the outer church – people like many of you: church members who really loved Jesus and wanted to live the Christian Life as much as I did. How do you discourage people who have already died to this world? So I went from a 650-member church to a 120-member church because they wanted to learn about prayer and what the Bible was really about. And Jesus kept shifting on me, from the generic “Savior” in American mythology to the most committed, purposeful, strategic, prayerful MAN our world has ever seen: God’s Messiah, sent to save, redeem, and lead us.

Eventually, as you know, I came back here hoping this church would pull out of its doldrums, recover its purpose, and become a “way station” for serious pilgrims for a little while longer. Yet in the long run, this church will not last. This is a temporal world. Where do we think we are? This church will not last, but *you* will! Some of you are already on the Christian Path, and I do not have to persuade you about how wonderful it is. But lots of people around here do not know this yet, or have only tiny inklings. Every time another person awakens to the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives, I rejoice. It’s one of the things that lights my life.

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And always at the core of all of this is the man Jesus. Only, of course, the man Jesus is also for us our Resurrected Lord – the Holy Spirit. But apart from the man Jesus, what do we know about the character, the purpose, the intentions of the Holy Spirit? Well, we have our experiences, of course, though they are laced with subjective layers of impressions and hopes and aspirations. Mostly we know and trust the Holy Spirit because this *is* our Resurrected Lord. What we see and know about Jesus will hold true of Jesus in His higher dimensions.

So back to the one thing I am hoping to set before you today: To understand the man Jesus, we must begin to notice how He lived His life with no apparent concern for whether His deeds or His words pleased or displeased anybody. We find this principle at work with a very disturbing consistency in His life. Jesus took no pains to gain the approval of individuals. He took no pains to gain the approval of groups (Sadducees, Pharisees, Zealots, Priests, even the Sanhedrin). He took no notice of whether the individuals or the groups were rich or poor; influential or outcasts (Samaritans); powerful or disinherited.

When we stop to consider it for a moment, this is a very rare and extremely interesting observation to be able to make about any human being. We all go our own way *at moments*. The fascinating parts of any famous person's story are the times when they stand against the pressures of the people around them. But for other people I have known or read about, these are only moments. Except, of course, for a few at the other end of the spectrum. There are a few asocial individuals who are so totally self-centered and self-absorbed that they care nothing for anyone except themselves. But I have no trouble realizing that they are not at all like Jesus.

Jesus' whole life was marked by a quality of fearless freedom which is virtually unknown among our kind. With one possible exception, I can think of no other man in human history who took so little notice of his responsibility to be acceptable to other people. That exception is Siddhartha Gautama – the Buddha. This quality is all the more remarkable when we stop to consider that being acceptable to some people or to some group has top priority most of the time in most of our lives.

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I have purposefully stayed away from the glowing illustrations of this quality in Jesus. I have not chosen the crucifixion story, or the pressures of Palm Sunday. I have not chosen the more obvious examples of His arguments with the Pharisees or the Priests, or the times He disobeyed the religious laws of His time. I have not chosen to speak of the time Jesus disowned His own mother and brothers, or the time He told His own disciples that if they did not like His message, they could leave. I have chosen, instead, the story of the Gerasene demoniac, precisely because it illustrates the point without any intention of doing so.

The story of Legion is deep and complex, and its meanings are many. But forget all that for the moment. This story begins with a commonplace occurrence: Jesus is on an outing with His friends. I like that, don't you? No fancy plans; just an ordinary picnic to get away and relax for a while.

But Jesus no more than sets foot on this quiet little vacation spot when this naked maniac comes screaming down the hill. And in that same instant, all the turmoil and challenges and responsibilities of life come rushing onto the scene again.

Now we can catch a glimpse of what Jesus was really like. Is He going to live the way He speaks, out here where only His best friends will see Him or know?

Meanwhile, Peter, who so often speaks for the rest of us, yells, "Holy Moses, back in the boat you guys – the place is alive with creeps!" So they pile pack in the boat and take off, laughing and joking. "Boy, did you see the look on that guy's face?" "Hey Matt, who said you could invite your psychiatrist?" "Hey Jim, you gotta go back. I think he wanted to introduce you to his sister." "Wow, what a life! We don't realize how lucky we are."

But not this time. How do we describe Jesus' actual response? We cannot, with any detailed accuracy. We only know that Jesus moved into the situation with calmness and confidence and commanded victory for this man's inner warfare. Amazing, but we all know that part. What about the hidden part?

I think it should be pointed out that Jesus did not consult the man's parents. He did not check with the doctors for their diagnosis. He did not ask who was responsible for this man, or who might be brought in to take care of him. We might further note that Jesus got

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a cold reception for getting involved at all without first gaining the consent and permission of the community. It is recorded that all the people of the district came and asked Jesus to depart.

Have you ever done something that seemed to you good and right, only to be despised by the parents, the friends, the doctors, the authorities of the community around you? I further note that Jesus *did* leave, without protest or explanation or argument. He healed Legion without caring who liked it; without caring who would approve or disapprove; without caring who might praise Him or hate Him because of it.

And now I have to notice that Jesus did not really care what Legion himself thought about it. In fact, with His own mission barely begun, Jesus turned away this man who would doubtless have been a loyal follower to a fault. I suspect that was the very reason Jesus turned him away. Legion would have been too grateful and too beholden. That kind of dependence would have been almost as far away from mature manhood as demon possession. And in His own strange and often hard-to-track way, Jesus cared about what was good for Legion.

So it seems, at least to me, that Jesus was not unmoved by people's approval because He did not care about them. Rather, the very strange opposite is true. Jesus cared too much about people to allow the pressures and desires and assumptions of the society around Him to shape or control His love. Jesus did what was best for Legion without seeming to care about what Legion wanted Him to do or what anybody else wanted Him to do.

But *far, far deeper* than that – guiding and instructing it all – Jesus was so busy trying to please God that He had no time or energy left over for trying to please anyone else.

You may or may not appreciate this picture of Jesus. I present it to you because I have come to believe that among many, many other things, this was the sort of man that Jesus really was. Jesus was a man who never tried to please anybody – only God.