

“The Real Jesus”

What was Jesus really like? There have many attempts to write a biography of Jesus. There was a popular movement after the First World War for theologians to probe behind the gospel records to get at the *real* Jesus, in the sense of finding out His background and His psychological behavior. But what happened was that the Jesus who emerged looked like and acted like the kind of person each writer *thought* He ought to be! For instance, a businessman named Bruce Barton wrote a book, *The Man Nobody Knows*. He wanted to make Christ appealing to other businessmen so they would believe in Him. But the Jesus who came out in this biography looked like the typical American businessman of the time – nowhere near the real Jesus at all.

Finally, the great missionary/musician/theologian Albert Schweitzer wrote a classic called *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, in which he said it is impossible to get a psychological portrait or a detailed biography of this Stranger of Galilee. So he sort of put an end to this attempt to forge a simple and complete life story of Jesus.

But isn't it important to try to get as accurate a picture of Jesus as we can - to do our best to discover “The Real Jesus”? I think so! Let's look more closely at the kind of person Jesus was, realizing our human limitations, however, as we do. There is relatively little material written about Him. Most is contained in the 4 gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John). Even what we find there is not just plain biographical information, but interpretations of Jesus from the perspective of faith. Besides, since Jesus was not just a man, but the God-man (fully God, fully man), there will always remain a certain mystery about Him because of His unique mix of divinity and humanity.

Our quest to discover the real Jesus is made more difficult, too, because how we see Jesus is colored by some common assumptions about Him. For instance, that Jesus looked like the famous painting, Sallman's head of Christ, with the long, flowing hair, a well-groomed Jesus who had a look of serenity on His face. Sort of “religious” looking! Or that Jesus was this nice, grandfatherly type man who had a sweet temperament and enjoyed having children sit on his lap.

But in spite of the limitations we encounter searching for the true Jesus, it's important to try, because Jesus represents “authentic humanity”. He's the model, the epitome, of what we humans were created to be like. So even though there will always be a mystery about Him, and we always see Him through the lens of our biases, it's worth trying to get a clear picture of Jesus.

So much can be said about the personality of Jesus, but I want to try to point out some things that we can easily overlook about Him. ***First of all, Jesus was a real, honest-to-goodness man!*** Virile, masculine.

Sometimes the images we get of Him paint Him as a rather soft figure, even effeminate. But we get a clue to His *masculinity* when we look at who followed Him. "As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishers. And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.' Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father

Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him" (Matthew 4:18-22). Fishermen! Rough, earthy, unsophisticated. Sort of like guys you see on these fishing shows on TV – redneck types! Another of Jesus' disciples was Simon the Zealot. A radical! A hot-blooded Jewish nationalist who sided with those who wanted to overthrow Romans through violence or insurrection! *These guys* would hardly have followed a “sissy”, a nerdy-type!

Jesus was a *carpenter*. His hands were calloused and dirty. No doubt his arms were muscular. Remember, these were pre-deodorant days, and Jesus got sweaty from working hard with a hammer and saw.

Some people today get the idea that Christianity is only for women (and old people). This macho man says, “Aw, I leave religion up to my wife!” “You're not gonna see *me* in church.” “This Christianity stuff is for weaklings and little twerps!”

In most of the churches I've served, women outnumber the men. Now I'm glad for women who are disciples of Jesus. I appreciate the ministries that ladies do. But the Christian faith is for rugged *men* too. It's thrilling when a 260 lb. football player gives a testimony for Jesus! Or when a nationally known racecar driver talks about his Christian faith. Truth is: Most men don't have near the guts Jesus had! To go into Jerusalem when He knew the religious leaders were looking for a chance to kill him. To speak God's truth even though He knew it would get Him hung on a cross. Men, do you have the courage to do that? The real Jesus was a Jesus a full-blooded man!

Then too, ***Jesus enjoyed life!*** Let's look at a remarkable Scripture, found in Matthew 11:16-19. These are Jesus' words: “But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.” Jesus said it's so hard to please people! John the Baptist came, living an austere, ascetic life, and people complained, "He has a demon!" Jesus came, eating and drinking, and people accused Him of being a glutton and a drunk, a friend of all the lowlifes! Let's be careful here, this is *not* to say Jesus was an alcoholic! He never sinned. But apparently He knew how to have a good time! You don't get a reputation for being the party type if you're a sourpuss and a killjoy!

Some people see Jesus just as a “man of sorrows and acquainted with grief”. He *was* that, because He suffered for our sins. But He was also a man who knew how to laugh and have a good time! He told funny stories, using oriental humor. For instance, he said don't cast out the speck in your brother's eye until you get rid of the telephone pole hanging out your own eye!

I was watching one of those old films on the life of Jesus. I don't remember if it was *King of Kings* or *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. As I watched it I was struck by how Jesus was portrayed in that film. He seemed to walk around in a daze, a wooden figure, with a far-off look in His

eyes. Joyless. Emotionless!

There are some newer paintings of Jesus I like - one in particular, where He is actually laughing. Not that we know what Jesus looked like physically, but I prefer this more vibrant portrayal of Jesus to some of the older artists' renderings of Him.

Some people think that if you're going to be like Jesus you have to put your smile and laughter in cold storage for the rest of your life. My first years as a Christian, I fell into a style of Christianity that was narrow-minded, judgmental, legalistic. Don't dance. Don't play cards. Don't go to movies. Christians should be sober and straight-laced. "I don't smoke and I don't chew, and I don't go with girls who do!" I was concerned about "worldliness". Now there is such a thing as "worldliness", and the Bible warns against it. But I came to believe that "worldliness" does not mean you can't enjoy life and its pleasures. Worldliness, rather, is *when material things and the things of this life become more important than God.*

There are some Christians who are just kind of gun-shy and suspicious of enjoying life – like they just can't let loose and have a rip roaring time without feeling guilty. Of course, if ordinary Christians shouldn't laugh and enjoy life, that's even more true of pastors, preachers! A pastor named Stephen Brown tells a true story in his book about pastoral ministry called *Where the Action Is*. A friend of his, a woman, married a clergyman. When she went to her 10-year class reunion, as she talked to a former classmate of hers, in the course of conversation this classmate discovered that this woman had married a pastor. A look of horror crossed the woman's face, and in a voice dripping with sympathy she said to the pastor's wife, "Oh, I'm so sorry – sex is so wonderful." (Of course, you know that pastors and their spouses don't have babies through sex. We find them in the cabbage patch, or the stork sends them via Amazon Prime!)

Jesus enjoyed life! He reveled in the goodness of His Father's creation! Christians, above all people, ought to be freed up to laugh and have fun, because our sins are forgiven and we're living with the promise of eternal life with the Lord! The church ought to be a fun place to be! So many churches, worship services, are joyless. Not that this is to be Comedy Hour. But the church ought to be a warm and fun place to be!

Jesus was a *man*....He *enjoyed life*...and **Jesus got angry!** For instance, Matthew 21:12-13 tells us this: "Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, 'It is written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a den of robbers.'"" Jesus went into the temple and very forcibly chased the religious leaders out who were desecrating the temple with their unfair practices. He was angry at the injustice done there.

Here's another evidence from the Bible of how angry Jesus became at times: "Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They were watching him to see whether he would cure him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." Then he said to them, 'Is it lawful to do good

or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?' But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and his hand was restored" (Mark 3:1-5). Jesus was angry at the religious leaders for their hardness of heart.

There is a hymn of the church that refers to Jesus as "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild." Was our Lord "meek and mild"? He was "meek" in the true sense of that word – it means humble, it means having strength that's tamed and under control. But He wasn't this mild-mannered "Mr. Milquetoast" as He is sometimes pictured. Jesus really got ticked off at times! When Jesus saw an injustice, someone being taken advantage of (as with the temple moneychangers), he got mad! When Jesus encountered religious people who had little compassion for their fellow human beings, He boiled inside!

Anger is a God-given emotion. It's a natural response to certain situations. Some people have difficulty owning and expressing their anger. Perhaps they grew up in a family where as children they weren't allowed to show their anger towards their parents, or they grew up in a family where their parents didn't model healthy ways to express anger. And *Christians*, sometimes, have more difficulty with anger because they have this notion that "good Christians don't get mad; they're always nice".

Jesus wasn't always nice! Someone has said, "In his own day (Jesus) deflated the pompous, punctured the proud, berated the exploiters, exposed the hypocrites, expelled the racketeer, put probing questions to the rich young ruler...". Contrary to that, sometimes Christians and the Church feel it's our duty not to offend anyone, to smile and make everyone happy. I once heard about someone who did a paper for a master's or doctoral degree. The theme was, "What's wrong with the ministry (clergy)?" This person's whole dissertation consisted of 7 words: "They just smile, and smile, and smile."

There are situations where Christians, and the Church, ought to be angry enough to challenge some of the evil we see going on in our community or state or nation! Dr. Wallace Fisher was Senior Pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church in Lancaster for a number of years. He led that congregation through transformation into a vital witness in their community. Dr. Fisher wrote a book about the renewal at Trinity Lutheran. The book was titled *From Tradition to Mission*. He told how part of his early strategy was to correct distorted images of Jesus. He preached a sermon called "Was Jesus Meek and Mild?" He writes of that early sermon: "It pleaded with the parish to lay aside its flabby, delicately colored pictures of Jesus and to recognize this robust man whose decisiveness in handling God's truth was so clear-cut that he antagonized religious people and political leaders to the point where they had to kill him in the hope of silencing him." In this sermon Dr. Fisher pleaded, "'Behold the man', recognize, and accept him as the norm and source of true humanity and authentic ministry." There is a time, and a place, for Christian believers, like our Lord, to be angry and to confront the evil in the world!

Jesus was a *man*...He enjoyed life...He got angry. One other thing: ***Jesus struggled at times with the difficulty of doing the Father's will.*** Jesus once said, "I always do what pleases the

Father” (John 8:29). That doesn’t mean it always came easy! I think sometimes we get the idea that since Jesus was God it was no sweat for Him to obey the Father. It’s sort of like He did it on “autopilot”. But Jesus was *tempted* to do wrong, just like us. He faced intense temptation in the wilderness for 40 days, tempted by devil. And temptations came to Him every day.

Probably the hardest time for Jesus to remain true to God’s will was in the Garden of Gethsemane. He knew the cross lie ahead. Alone, He kneels down and asks God to allow Him to avoid the cross. “Take this cup (the cup of suffering) from me”. Three times He prays that prayer. Scripture says He sweat great drops of blood over this decision. When’s the last time we literally “sweat blood” in wrestling with a temptation? Finally, Jesus says, “Father, I don’t want to die on this cross...but OK, I want to do your will, not my own.”

There’s no shame in being tempted! Jesus never sinned, but He was sorely tempted at times! It’s OK to admit that sometimes we want our own will, rather than whatever God may want for us. Our Savior, at least near the end of His life, would have liked to have done His own thing.

So, in those times when *we* are tempted, or in those times when we would prefer doing things our way rather than God’s way, this Jesus is there to help us!

Scripture gives us encouragement. Hebrews 2:18 says, "Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted."

Hebrews 4:15-16 says this, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.
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