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WHY JESUS?

As a child I received instruction both in the Bible and in the Talmud. I am a Jew, but I am enthralled by the luminous figure of the Nazarene. . . . No one can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word.

—Albert Einstein

It's only natural that many of us have a difficult time grasping the character and personality of Jesus. After all, when he walked on earth, hardly anybody who knew him understood who he really was. The disciples walked and talked with him for three years, but at the end, they were still clueless. One of them, John, was perhaps Jesus' best friend, but on the island of Patmos when he had a vision of the glorified Savior, John was so shocked by the sight that he "fell at his feet as though dead" (Rev. 1:17).

We talk a lot about "knowing Christ," yet our image of the one we seek to know can be terribly inaccurate. Each Sunday, millions of us sit in pews and, if the sermon is not particularly stimulating, perhaps we gaze at a stained glass image of Jesus holding a lamb. He seems to be sweet . . . but to be honest, a bit stiff. And millions more who darken the doors of the church only at Christmas think of Jesus as only a happy baby being watched by adoring parents, farm animals, and a few smelly laborers.

What was Jesus like . . . really? Was he someone who was always meek and mild, the quintessential “Lamb of God”? Or was he also the “Lion of Judah”? Most of us are far more comfortable with him as a lamb than as a lion, but only someone with a lion’s heart

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would call detractors “hypocrites,” a “brood of vipers,” and “whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean” (Matt. 23:27, 33).

INSIGHT AND A BOX OF POPCORN

Shortly before Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* was released, I saw a film about the life of Jesus called *The Gospel of John*—a word-for-word depiction of John’s gospel that received very little publicity. I found it disturbing. I had seen *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and those horribly inaccurate films made my blood boil. But *The Gospel of John* disturbed me in a different way. The film showed the full range of Jesus’ emotions and actions, from gentleness with children, to grief over death, to defiance against insolent opposition.

The Gospel of John took Jesus down from the stained glass and made him real. Actually, it’s less threatening to see Jesus up on the wall in shades of blue, green, and yellow glass, holding that lamb and looking so sweet. As I watched the film, suddenly I was one of the crowd watching Jesus vigorously defend himself against the accusations of the Pharisees. I was a disciple enjoying a campfire and marveling at the leader I’d just seen restore sight to a blind man. I was a religious scholar whose identity was shattered because this man represented an awesomely powerful and amazingly gracious God I knew very little about. I was disturbed by the depth of Jesus’ forgiveness and by the tenacity of his convictions. I

realized I would rather excuse than forgive someone who has hurt me, and I'd rather avoid conflict than stand up to an irrational, angry person who attacks me.

If our image of Jesus Christ is the stiff, sweet guy filtering light on Sunday mornings, he won't be much of an example for us to follow. Yet as we develop a more accurate perception of him, we may be disturbed to find that he doesn't fit the neat little box we've put him in. We will be tremendously challenged to try to follow him and live by his example.

People who serve in vocational Christian service know that Christ is the best possible example for how we should live when it comes to our ministries and family lives. Many of us, however, look to other models in our relationships with business executives or employees. Jesus is the most dynamic leader the world has ever known, but business and academic leaders often find other examples to follow. They perceive Jesus to be too soft, too out of touch, too ancient . . . but that's not the case at all. He was more in touch with people than anyone in all of history, and his responses show a strength of character and a commitment to truth that is unsurpassed. He's worthy to be model for all of us, no matter what our vocations may be.

IT'S ABOUT THEM; IT'S ABOUT US

If you've glanced at the table of contents, you saw twelve kinds of people we'll examine as we go through this book. A few of them probably stood out to you, either because you closely identify with them or because they touched a nerve with you. Almost all of us have certain people in our families, at work, and in our neighborhoods who drive us nuts. Some merely annoy us, but relating to others is like living in a small box with a porcupine. We get stuck every time we move! In our attempts to relate to these people, we've tried everything we know, but each step forward is soon followed by a step back.

We want to interact with all kinds of people, but in many cases we're confused about what to do and close to giving up. However, a look at the life of Christ gives us hope. Jesus related to annoying, difficult people with a powerful blend of truth and grace. If we watch and listen carefully, we can learn from his example.

Thankfully, most of us also know two or three people who are always a delight to be around. We may have a son or daughter with whom we "click," a boss or co-worker who appreciates our abilities, or a close companion who knows our every thought—and still calls us "friend." Sadly, many of these positive relationships may be taken for granted or overshadowed because we are so consumed by the painful, difficult people in our lives. Jesus

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wasn't preoccupied with others' problems, and he didn't ignore those who did well. He took time to value people, to celebrate their successes and affirm their courage. Jesus saw every event and interaction, every step down a dusty road, and every campfire as

an opportunity to shape lives. He looked below surface behaviors and saw into hearts. He spoke eloquently of life's deepest motivations, and he modeled a life of strength, love, and service.

But to be painfully honest, the problem in many difficult relationships isn't "them." It's me. The way one person complains and another person seeks attention comes across like scraping fingernails on a blackboard. It grates on my nerves!

Our backgrounds and perceptions shape our reactions. They can be complex and even contradictory at times. We feel love and fear, noble ambition and rank selfishness, courage and timidity. We need to understand why we react the way we do in various situations. That insight offers the possibility of change.

Each of us has a natural bent in relationships, to be tough or tender. When other people are hurting, some of us offer a quick fix or ignore the suffering person; some offer genuine empathy and comfort. When other people are demanding, some of us stiffen and refuse to give an inch; some value peace above all things and quickly give in. When other people succeed, some of us smile on the outside but internally seethe with envy. Others, though, are genuinely thrilled to see friends and family thrive.

Too often we ask, “Why don’t people do what I want them to do?” But a far more important (and wiser) question is, “Why do I react to others the way I do?” As we examine a dozen different types of people, we will try to understand what makes each group tick. At the same time, we need to learn why their behavior might tick us off! Those insights will clarify our choices so we can respond in ways that build up people instead of destroying them.

THE CALL: IT’S FOR YOU

Throughout the history of the Christian faith, some have tried to segment Christ’s message into two distinct arenas, the sacred and the secular. They have argued that loving and serving God should be separated from what we do in businesses, neighborhoods, and schools. But Martin Luther (and a few years later, the Puritans) challenged that thinking. They taught powerfully and clearly that Christ is our model in *every* sphere of life, in the office as much as in the pew.

Those who divide life into the sacred and the secular don’t bring the power of God and God’s calling into the business world. But calling is not just for pastors and missionaries. God has called each of us, no matter what one’s vocation might be. In his outstanding book, *The Call*, Os Guinness describes our calling as, “the truth that God calls us to himself so decisively that everything we are, everything we do, and everything we have is invested with a special devotion and dynamism lived out as a response to his summons and service.”¹

1 Os Guinness, *The Call* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), p. 4.