

Jesus as Teacher

By David Bisgrove

If you asked a typical New Yorker to list some of the world's greatest teachers, Jesus Christ would certainly make many respondents' short list. Even people who know very little about Jesus and Christianity are familiar with some of his teachings, like his exhortation to turn the other cheek and the idea that the meek will inherit the earth. And it is certainly fair and accurate to say that he lived his life based on his teachings. For example, he admonished his disciples to "love [their] enemies and pray for those who persecute [them]"¹ and even while he was dying an extraordinarily painful and unjust death, he was recorded as praying "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing."² Jesus famously said "...I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."³ That teaching has influenced many people to spend their money and time caring for the poor and the marginalized. This is just a small sample of some of the beautiful and life giving teaching of Jesus.

However, there is an aspect to Jesus' teachings that could be characterized as disturbing and negative. In the same passage in Matthew 25 where Jesus is talking about our care for the marginalized, he gives a frightening and seemingly unfair picture of what happens when you aren't generous: "depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."⁴ At two points in two of the biographical books of Jesus' life, Jesus refers to his students as "evil."⁵ Also, his standards for what it means to follow him are pretty costly:

"... 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?'"⁶

But what should most alarm a casual student of Jesus' teachings is what he taught about himself. In the book of John, Jesus says "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."⁷ Not only does Jesus teach that he is the only way to God, he teaches that he IS God:

" 'Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.' 'You are not yet fifty years old,' the Jews said

¹ Matthew 5:44

² Luke 23:34

³ Matthew 25:35-36

⁴ Matthew 25:41

⁵ Matthew 7:11 and Luke 11:13

⁶ Mark 8:34-37

⁷ John 14:6

to him, 'and you have seen Abraham!' 'I tell you the truth,' Jesus answered, 'before Abraham was born, I AM!'"⁸ (emphasis added)

And again, in Mark 8: "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."⁹

What are we to make of Jesus' teachings then? On the one hand he promotes concepts that are inspirational and have universal appeal, like love, peace and forgiveness. On the other, he talks about judgment and wrath and claims to forgive sin and accept worship, two things that are usually reserved for God. How do we reconcile these seemingly contradictory aspects of Jesus' teachings? It seems that there are only two basic approaches. On the one hand if Jesus really did believe that he was divine and that he was worthy of worship and also had the power of life and death at his disposal, would it really be safe to trust his wisdom about other things? Why would I trust a deluded megalomaniac about how to treat my enemy (turn the other cheek)? Why would I privilege his wisdom over my own?

The other option is to consider that perhaps Jesus really was who he said he was. It seems more intellectually honest (and fairer to Jesus himself) to either take him at his word, or reject him all together. A comprehensive reading of Jesus' teaching reveals that the moral force of his wisdom and ethics are tied directly to his claim to be the divine author and embodiment of all truth. His teaching represented a manifesto of a complete way of life that was ultimately tied to trusting that he was both the Savior and King of the world. Therefore we are left with the words of C.S. Lewis who wrote:

*"A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic - on the level with a man who says he is a poached egg - or he would be the devil of hell. You must take your choice. Either this was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us."*¹⁰

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⁸ John 8:56-58

⁹ Mark 8:38

¹⁰ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity : The Case for Christianity, Christian Behaviour and Beyond Personality* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 3 Edition, 2001), 52