

# The Radical Jesus – Aug. 5, 2012

## The Radical Jesus

by David Green

Living as we do in the land of “Chick Fil-A Appreciation Day,” where conservative Christianity appears to be the predominant form of religion, it’s sometimes hard to imagine that Jesus Christ would ever be thought of as a radical by many of his followers.

When you belong to a faith that represents the status quo, it might be a little uncomfortable to think the guy your religion is named after was anything but status quo. It’s much nicer to imagine Jesus would never challenge scripture or religious authority, that he would agree with you on a whole host of social issues, that he would insist on sticking to tradition, and that he would be suspicious of and reject people you perceive as different and even sinful.

But what would really be nice – if you were a Christian who believed in that kind of Jesus – would be for you to actually read the Bible you claim to take so literally.

Of course, we can’t paint all Christians with the same broad brush. After all, I’m an ordained Christian minister, and it sickens and saddens me deeply when I see people take the name of Jesus and use it in any way to demean or discriminate or claim moral superiority over anyone else. I can’t think of anything more despicable than promoting hate in the name of a man who taught and practiced radical unconditional love and acceptance.

That’s just my opinion. But based on a lot of evidence, including what many would agree is the most profound teaching of Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount, the conclusion I come to is he was very much a radical, religious and social liberal.

The over-riding issue is the Bible is interpreted quite differently by people, depending on how you’ve been taught to read it. What’s interesting to me is that for evangelical fundamentalists, their claim is the Bible can be interpreted in one way only, while overlooking the rather obvious fact the Bible contains not one, but four distinct accounts of the life of Jesus, each one a unique interpretation in itself. The gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, each paint a portrait of Jesus with a different canvass and palette of colors. They were written several decades after Jesus’ lifetime, and each one was meant to address a specific audience, or a particular congregation of Christians.

These were folks who’d only heard the bare-bones story of Jesus; a story that had already been heavily influenced by the interpretation of people like the Apostle Paul. Their understanding of Jesus was based less on biographical details, and more on the concept that Jesus represented a new way of being in relationship with God, specifically, the God of the Jews.

An essential piece of Paul’s teaching was Jesus would return – very soon, within the lifetime of those living in the first century – and usher in a new millennium. Where all the problems of life, like Roman oppression, war, disease, famine, and even death, would be erased. And that interpretation heavily influenced almost everything later written about Jesus. With that kind of future orientation, it wasn’t all that important to know about Jesus beyond the claim he died sacrificially, overcame death, and was waiting for the right moment to make a triumphant, cosmic return.

But as time went on and Jesus did not come back, more and more people became interested in his life story. After all, there must've been some pretty amazing stuff he said and did before his death; some things that could be guidelines on how you might conduct your life in the meantime. In response to that need, several biographies were written – some we know about and some that have been lost to history. The four that made the final cut were those that had received the widest circulation, and for the church councils meeting in the fourth century who decided what would be in the Bible, those four gospels pretty much represented the beliefs about Jesus that had already been agreed on for some time.

It didn't matter so much that the gospels didn't all tell the exact same stories in the same way or in the same sequence. Because it was understood these books were not intended as objective biographies; they were not newspaper reports. On the contrary, they were very carefully crafted works, each one with a common theme running throughout, intended to prove a point. They took basic events that had been passed down in oral form, and they interpreted – and in many cases, accentuated – those events in light of accepted ideas of who Jesus was.

Even so, it's interesting what the church councils allowed to be left in the gospels. By the time decisions were made about putting the Bible together, it was important to present a fairly consistent view of Jesus, but quite a few of his more radical ideas were retained.

Matthew provides plenty of good examples of this. Of all the gospels, Matthew emphasizes the importance of the teachings of Jesus – as opposed to emphasizing stories of miraculous deeds – as a way of illustrating his point that Jesus was the authentic son of God. The way Jesus taught was not at all unusual. He followed a common formula among Jewish teachers when they interpreted Hebrew law. What made Jesus stand out was the content of what he said: the sheer audacity to challenge conventional wisdom and authority, to turn things on their ear. Not only was he an original thinker, but because of what he said he tended to draw large crowds of everyday people who were suffering under a system of religious and political intolerance and injustice. People looking for a word of hope.

For instance, the average person in first-century Palestine could be taxed at roughly 50% – and up – when you combined Jewish temple taxes along with Roman civil taxes. There was a small middle class, an even smaller class of very affluent landowners, and a huge majority of people barely eking out a daily existence. Both the religious establishment and the civil government were corrupt and in cahoots, and everyone knew it.

And in an effort to maintain religious and cultural purity in the face of an increasingly diverse Romanized world, organizations like the Pharisees and Sadducees fought over the best way to impose moral order. While these groups may have disagreed over details of how to interpret Jewish law, they did agree in principle that rigidly resisting cultural and religious diversity was the best way to win God's favor. By doing so, they believed, it would restore the ideal of a long-lost kingdom where everyone worships the same God faithfully and prospers personally.

But for the average person, just keeping up with appearances and staying in the good graces of the religious goon squads was exhausting work. It created a poisonous environment where you were rewarded for turning in your neighbor for even a minor religious infraction. And, it was assumed the more faithfully you adhered to a strict religious code, the more you would be personally enriched in material ways.

Into this volatile mix, Jesus stepped in as someone well-schooled in Jewish law, but who otherwise seemed to have spent a semester studying abroad (maybe with the Buddha, as some have mirthfully suggested!), but coming home bursting at the seams with ideas that spat in the face of the religious establishment and the conservative cultural police.

His first public speech is what's come to be known as the Sermon on the Mount. And by the way, Matthew sets the scene for this sermon on a mountainside very deliberately. It's his way of saying that Jesus is the new Moses, who if you recall, came down from a mountain with the Ten Commandments. So, here's Jesus, now delivering – in effect – the definitive interpretation of those commandments. He's come, he says, not to replace that law, but to fulfill it; to explain what it really means.

Jesus starts out with the Beatitudes, a series of statements that begin with "Blessed are," or "how fortunate are." But rather than state what was expected, like those who are wealthy and powerful and religiously pious are obviously blessed, Jesus claims just the opposite.

He says, "No, the blessed are those who are poor, those who mourn, the meek, those who seek righteousness and justice, those who are merciful, those whose hearts are pure, and those who are persecuted." In other words, it's the folks who are trying to do the right thing by one another, not touting their religious superiority or lord it over others, those who actually cut other people some slack and show some mercy, and those who may have different opinions...those are the folks who are ultimately living in ways that reflect God's intention for human conduct.

Next, Jesus offers a series of affirmations. For those who live that way, they are a light that's meant to shine, a visible example for others to follow. And, they are the salt of the earth; in other words, by the good things you do, you add zest.

But that's just the warm-up. Jesus then begins to challenge conventional religious and cultural assumptions head-on. And not just in his time, but also in our time. Each of these statements begins with him saying, "You have heard it said," meaning, "here's the traditional way of looking at things." He covers a lot of ground, including issues like anger and revenge, adultery and divorce, and how to treat enemies.

What's interesting for us is how little things have changed as far as what we might say are traditional, conservative values related to each of those topics. Those values have to do with making rather black and white judgments and being especially harsh in punishing offenders.

But for every one of those issues, Jesus offers an alternative way of seeing things. For example, he says "You have heard it said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give him your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to walk a mile, go also the second mile."

In effect, Jesus is claiming a higher ethical standard for human conduct than what's written in scripture. He's basically admitting the Bible does not have the final say. And that those who read the Bible narrowly as a book of rules and regulations that must not be questioned and that must be obeyed to the letter, are missing the point entirely.

Scripture may be useful for many things, and may be beautiful and edifying, but it does not have the last word; there are ways of living with one another that go beyond the limits of scripture. There are always new ways of seeing things.

And the boldest of these ways is all at once the simplest – and yet – the most difficult thing for any of us to do. It's come to be called the Golden Rule. It sounds old hat because we've heard it so many times, but in truth, it requires a major reorientation of our normal world view.

It's simply this: "In everything," he says, "do to others as you would have them do to you." He goes on to say that everything that's written – all we're created and called to do – is summed up in that one phrase. I think Jesus knew that to take the Golden Rule seriously would mean a radical transformation of how humans relate to one other, in every way. I'm also pretty certain he didn't pretend to be the only author of that concept. But whether he did or not, we all know that in one form or another, most every world religion and humanistic philosophy shares that very same ethic.

In other words, you don't have to be a Christian to follow the Golden Rule. Treating others as you wish to be treated is the essence, the touchstone, the ultimate ideal, of right human relationships.

In fact, if we take Jesus at his word and follow the path of that ideal, we have to conclude that he was advocating nothing less than a universalist world view when it comes to the belief system or code of conduct we follow.

Because you can't very well claim to do unto others as you'd like them to do to you, while insisting that your particular belief is the only valid belief, much less imposing that belief onto everyone else. To do unto others as you would have them do to you, how can you claim your particular view of a committed, loving, covenant relationship between two people is the only right way, and that your way of having the same kind of relationship and enjoying all the rights and privileges of marriage is unavailable to others?

Explain to me what doing unto others as you would have them do to you, has to do with making statements – as the president and CEO of Chick Fil-A recently did – that dehumanizes others and creates divisiveness and encourages already-entrenched prejudices. What he said may be protected free speech – it may be perfectly legal to express your intolerance – but does that make what you say moral or just or compassionate? Is that what Jesus meant by "doing unto others?" No, by any standard, I'm afraid that just doesn't work.

Apparently, it didn't work for Jesus either.

Not surprisingly, things like the Sermon on the Mount and Golden Rule didn't sit very well with religious authorities. But over time Jesus continued to rattle their cage to the point where they decided he was such a threat to the established way of things, they had no alternative but to have him killed.

The sad irony is, throughout history and certainly to this day, Jesus would no doubt present just as much of a threat to those who claim most loudly to speak for him, and in his name. Tragically, for many, doing unto others has

apparently shrunk in size to only apply to those “others” who look like you, think like you, love like you, and believe like you.

But you and I know better. If you hear an echo of the Unitarian Universalist principles in the Sermon on the Mount, and in the Golden Rule in particular, congratulations: you just earned a gold star. Not all of us have come here from a Christian background. Or if we have, we may have rejected it or we shy away from Christianity because so many Christians somehow believe that hatred and intolerance are virtues; that they are “keeping the faith.”

We may feel like Mahatma Gandhi, who said, “I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.” But as sad and true as that is in so many times and places, I’m convinced there is a positive alternative: to truly follow Unitarian Universalist principles is to live in the same way that Jesus taught and lived himself.

And that is to challenge the status quo, to carefully question scripture and tradition in light of modern realities, to shine a light on what is morally and ethically right, to welcome the stranger, to be accepting and inclusive, to embrace and love and serve all in sacrificial ways.

And by doing so, to live radically.

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