

The Radical Jesus

Jonathan Gallagher

The Jesus of today, as commonly understood, is far from the truth of the real Jesus. Having made Jesus in our own image, Jesus is now safe. Jesus is whatever we want him to be, and above all, “nice.” A suitable addition to a comfortable lifestyle, today’s Jesus that we endorse is so easily more a figment of our imagination than anything like the person who lived and walked and talked and made a difference two millennia ago.

For in our niceness and pleasantness, the true Jesus is allowed to say very little. He is transformed into icons and images, greeting cards and statuettes. The picture is what we want, not the disturbing reality of what he said and did, how he lived and died.

Christ was never viewed as a “safe” option in his lifetime. He was always seen as someone who made a difference, who was radical, dangerous even. In fact he was not allowed to live because the powers that were decided he just was *not* safe to have around. Only with the passing of the years has his revolutionary nature been accommodated into a placid, reassuring, and comfortable faith.

For he was radical even for the radicals. He himself said: “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn ‘a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.’” Matt. 10:34-36.

Jesus did not hesitate to use a direct approach and was not a stranger to controversy. He called the religious leaders of his time “whitened sepulchers, full of dead men’s bones.” He called the respected pious men of his day hypocrites. He called the king a fox. He identified the establishment as a “brood of vipers.” He was associated with publicans and sinners, accused as a glutton and a wine-bibber. He accused the religious leaders of turning the Temple into a den of thieves. In his public addresses he did not mince his words but clearly showed what he thought of the narrow-mindedness of religious tradition. Jesus had no time for mock holiness.

He used unconventional approaches to healing: he deliberately healed on the Sabbath knowing what offence this would bring to those who believed they were especially religious. He recognized that his identification of the Isaiah passage with himself in Nazareth would bring immense conflict and danger, but went ahead anyway. He seemed not to care about property ownership when he sent the demons into the pigs; when challenged about his civic duties he arranged a miraculous payment from the mouth of a fish.

Jesus cared nothing for wealth or social position or power. He didn't even bother talking to Herod, the ultimate insult to a king. To Pilate he was brief and to the point, not seeking any kinds of favors.

Most of all, Jesus was not "nice." He represented nothing of that "niceness" which is so characteristic of Christianity today, a bland amorphous faith that is simply, well, nice.

[Actually nice is not really that nice anyway. The word nice comes from the Latin "nescius" meaning ignorant. By the thirteenth century in English it had come to mean stupid or foolish. Nice only became bland "nice"—meaning almost nothing—relatively recently.]

The whole of the sermon on the mount is an attack on niceness and formal religion. It cares not for hide-bound tradition, or the pretentious piety that is so often the guise of religion. Don't make it obvious you are fasting, trying to win respect. Don't make your prayers obvious, encouraging people to think how devout you are. Don't make your offerings apparent to others, as if your gifts to God are the measure of your spirituality.

Don't follow the human values system, rather follow the values of God. Reject intolerance, spiritual pretense, material concerns. Watch out for false prophets. Those who call out Lord, Lord do not all qualify for the kingdom. Even miracle-workers and great preachers will be rejected by God.

A litany of rejection—that religion in human form is unreliable at best, and anti-God at worst. A radical approach to the Truth—for the One who is Truth Incarnate stands among us.

The words of this "Charter of God's Kingdom" is full of inverse thinking, as far as we are concerned. For example, blessed to be poor in spirit? Rejoice in persecution? Happy those who mourn?

Adultery in the heart, not just in the action. Not only don't murder, but don't assault with insults. Do not swear, just say yes or no.

No more eye for eye, tooth for tooth. Turn the other cheek. Love your enemies.

Do not live your religious ostentatiously, wanting people to see how good you are. Goodness is not visibility, but in who you are.

Forgive your debtors. Store up heavenly treasure, not the treasure of this world. For your heart is where your treasure is. Don't worry about life.

Refuse to be judgmental, for you may have more faults than those you judge. Not everyone who claims to be good knows the Lord.

Not because he took pleasure from it, but Jesus is making the comfortable uncomfortable. Not for just doing so, as some have, but because it is the only way to make his hearers face the desperate importance of his message.

That is why Jesus challenged the religious norms of his time. Why he did not accept the accepted wisdom. Why he demanded re-thinking of the givens...

Forgive your brother seven times? More than anyone would have the right to expect, in normal human circumstance? No, says Jesus, don't even count your acts of forgiveness.

In contrast to the belief that wealth was a sign of God's blessing, Jesus says it is harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God than a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Even Jesus' disciples were astonished at this one, asking, "So who then can be saved?"

The first will be last, the last will be first. Whoever wishes to be great must be a servant. Wisdom and praise come not from the educated adults but from babes and children.

Such ideas fly in the face of contemporary beliefs, and rip the ground out from all the self-satisfied professional religionists. Jesus operates in opposition to normative concepts of the time, and it is hardly surprising that those in power and authority react against him and enforce their leadership. Jesus is "anti-establishment," and they demand to know "by what authority do you do these things?"

As a consequence, and because of such division on the very basics of who God is and how He operates, Jesus is placed in confrontation.

To the Pharisees: "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me?"

To the Sadducees: "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God."

Of the teachers of the Law: "But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders.... You teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.... White-washed tombs: you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness." Matt. 23:3,4; 13; 28.

Straining out gnats yet swallowing camels. (Pointed, and funny too!) Matt. 23:24. [Don't say that the common people did not laugh at that one...]

The gospels reveal many instances when Jesus confronts others, mainly to gain thought and reflection—perhaps even to shock people out of their comfort zone, to disturb their equilibrium. It's helpful to reflect on these statements and questions, and the situations they illustrate:

- You must be born again.
- Why do you call me good?
- Woman, what have I to do with you?
- Sell all that you have and give it to the poor.
- Who do men say that I am?
- I am the bread of life.
- Before Abraham was born, I am.
- Where are your accusers?
- Give them something to eat.
- Will you give me a drink?
- Stop grumbling among yourselves.
- Who made me a judge between you and him?
- Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders, you will not believe.

In every case Jesus is challenging his listeners to react, to think, to act outside of their conventional wisdom. In so many ways, Jesus shows what God really wishes is honest thought and reaction based not on what people *think* is appropriate, but rather on the principles of the kingdom. The radical Jesus wants a real response, not some formal or ritualized religious reaction. That is why some of his statements are so hard—because they appear to go against what human society would expect as the right thing to do. But in their essence they show this life as temporary and transient, with the “real reality” located in God’s kingdom, which operates on a totally different basis.

So “leave the dead to bury the dead”—not to be uncaring and disrespectful, but to show how the importance of following the way of Jesus even transcends societal norms and family values. Besides, the spiritually dead need nothing but to be buried anyway.

That’s the point behind Jesus’ bringing of “not peace but a sword,” and how this would set families against each other. Jesus is a radical challenge, and his message is one of a radical change of life—an inversion of the way we should think. Jesus sets common standards on their head, and points to the only true source of life and hope for the eternal future. Not because he deliberately wishes to offend, but because the situation is urgent

and to challenge is the only way. A comfortable message would lead only to soothing the way to self-destruction.

The inverse sayings

Jesus places our way of thinking on its head. For in reality it is our value system that is upside-down, for we live in a topsy-turvy world that is in opposition to God. So as Jesus tries to right our wrong-headed view of what is important, as he re-prioritizes life and identifies what is really true and enduring, he speaks his inverse sayings. Statements of truth through which he tried to turn our upside-down world the right way up.

On power and position: Jesus repeatedly rejects human ambition to power and position. To his disciples he says of lordship that “it should not be so among you.” He speaks of leaders as servants, and the last being first—setting the hierarchical structure of this world’s power scheme on its head. “Whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.” Mark 10:44-45. “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” Luke 14:11.

“Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, ‘If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.’ He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.’” Mark 9: 35. “And he said: ‘I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.’” Matt. 18: 3. See also Mark 10:13-16, Luke 9:46-50.

The aspiration to lordship and power is incompatible with Jesus’ values and principles. Instead, he looks for the innocence and transparency of a child. Children are rarely seen as important, certainly not in terms of leadership in society. But their perspective of clarity and openness, without intrigue and the lust for power, is what Jesus values most.

On what is truly valuable in life: “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” Matt. 10:39, similarly Matt. 16: 25. The self-centered view of what is important results in many failing to understand the real meaning of life. Only the adoption of Jesus’ way and following him will result in a meaningful and worthwhile life, whatever the problems and challenges.

“Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: ‘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? 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.’” Mark 8: 34-38.

On openness and revelation, as opposed to secrecy and hypocrisy: “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs. Luke 12:1-3.

Much of what we do and say has hidden motives and hypocritical values. But don’t think it will not all one day be revealed, says Jesus. The political machinations, the secret societies, the hidden agendas—all will fall away and be revealed for what they are. The openness of God and his kingdom of true values and principles is very different from our cloak-and-dagger existence full of lies and deception.

On living without materialistic concerns: “But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.” Luke 12:20,21.

This is the conclusion to Jesus’ story about the man who went on building bigger and bigger barns, and then died. His point: what is the profit in such materialistic investment? He expands on this to his disciples:

“Then Jesus said to his disciples: ‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. Life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?’” Luke 12:22-26.

How very different to the way the vast majority live in our upside-down world! Even the have-nots still look for material advancement in the same way as those who are already have. It is not the quantity of possessions, but the desire for them...

On being burdened down and over-concerned with this world: Jesus concludes his exposition on by the words of comfort: “For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Matt. 11:30.

Instead of being preoccupied with the here and now, accept the “light burden” of his way, says Jesus. As an antidote to the poison of selfishness and the curse of over-involvement with this world, Jesus provides the “peace that passes understanding” and the “joy of the Lord.” For how will you gain such peace and joy by following the inverted values of this world? asks Jesus.

On family ties and responsibilities: Even those societal norms we think are the most important—our family responsibilities—are not to be seen as taking precedence over God’s values, says Jesus. For they too can blind us to what is important...

“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple.” Luke 14: 26.

Even a denial of the right of family to prime attention—as Jesus reveals when he is told that his earthly family is outside waiting for him. Jesus’ response should not be seen as an uncaring dismissal, but as a picture-lesson in priorities. Jesus responds by asking who is his true family, and then answers his own question: “For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” Matt. 12:50.

Doing wrong—or failing to do right—because of family ties is still unacceptable, and Jesus even goes as far as inverting such responsibilities. But there is still love and care there, as demonstrated by Jesus’ care for his mother, even when on the cross itself. What he is arguing against is the excusing of oneself from taking decisions of eternal importance:

“As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, ‘I will follow you wherever you go.’ Jesus replied, ‘Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.’ He said to another man, ‘Follow me.’ But the man replied, ‘Lord, first let me go and bury my father.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.’ Still another said, ‘I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family.’ Jesus replied, ‘No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.’” Luke 9: 57-62.

Jesus offers no rewards of earthly value—no palaces or mansions, in fact he has nowhere to lay his head. He has no home here. Nor has he a family to which he must give supreme importance. The excuses offered by the speakers on the road illustrate the way in which we want to have both this world, and that of Jesus. We try to keep a foot in both camps, cloaking our lack of commitment by a show of family involvement. But it is a sham, and Jesus demands that we make sure of our true priorities.

On religion perverted: “And as he taught them, he said, ‘Is it not written: “My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations”? But you have made it “a den of robbers.”’” Mark 11:17.

Jesus is “opposite” again, in contrast and conflict with the established religious activities. He is offended by the ease by which religious values are so easily perverted into the formal, and exploited by those who should be illustrating truth. He directly attacks traditions such as “corban” through which you could donate your possessions to the temple and disregard your family responsibilities. “Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition,” he comments. Matt. 15:6.

As a result, says Jesus, “Others will come from the east and the west and take your places in the kingdom of heaven.” Matt. 8:11. This is a terribly offensive statement to those who considered themselves the chosen people of God.

Many sayings: In fact, Jesus words are frequently those of inverse sayings, turning the values we might expect on their heads, challenging thought and demanding response.

Be happy if you are hungry, for you will be fed.

Be happy if you weep, for you will laugh.

Rejoice when men hate you.

Those who live by the sword will die by the sword.

Through parables, though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.

What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean.'"

Take the plank out of your own eye before removing the speck from your brother's eye.

If someone hits you, turn the other cheek.

Whoever is not against us is for us.

Jesus dies to save and bring life.

...and so on. Jesus uses his words carefully, and radically. He wants response, and he wants the right choice to be made. So in his discourses, his parables, his talks with his disciples, he challenges thought, and illustrates the principles and values of his kingdom by such inverse sayings. Even the enduring quality of Jesus' world, the right-way-up, is illustrated though a saying that inverts our expectations: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away." Luke 21:33.

Inverse actions

Not just in words, but in radical actions...

Jesus touches lepers, heals a centurion's servant, sends demonic spirits into pigs, forgives a paralytic his sins, invites a tax collector, rejects fasting, challenges laws on ceremonial uncleanness, heals on the Sabbath, attacks the religious leadership, tells parables that undermine authority, accepts foreigners...

In so many ways that we miss this far from that society and time, Jesus was so radical as to be unacceptable by many. His very miracles are a challenge to the existing ways, and his methods offend those who are tied to the letter of the law.

"Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue ruler said to the people, 'There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.' The Lord answered him, 'You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?' When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing." Luke 13:14-16.

Jesus' challenge is not to reject the sanctity of the Sabbath, but to show how important the day is in illustrating the healing, saving God. Jesus' deliberate choice to do this brings him into sharp conflict with the religious establishment who fail to see the connection between acts of healing and God, for their God is a God of demands and requirements, not a God of grace and generosity.

“One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. There in front of him was a man suffering from dropsy. Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, ‘Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?’ But they remained silent. So taking hold of the man, he healed him and sent him away. Then he asked them, ‘If one of you has a son or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull him out?’ And they had nothing to say.” Luke 14:1-6.

The truth is that the religious leadership is so far from such an understanding that as a result of Jesus' healing miracles they plan his judicial murder. Irony of ironies, that the Son of God should be executed for claiming to be God, for healing on His healing Sabbath, for revealing the truth of His eternal kingdom to an upside-down kingdom of pain, evil and death.

For, as Jesus himself says, he comes to those who recognize their need, not those who think they have achieved salvation with their observance of rules.

“But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, ‘Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and “sinners”?’ Jesus answered them, ‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.’” Luke 5:30-32.

As a consequence Jesus is challenged as to his authority and as to the source of his power. “By what authority?” is the repeated question, whether spoken or not, from the religious authorities (see Matthew. 7:29 etc.) And as a way of explaining how Jesus heals, they suggest that he is using demonic power—miracles in the name of Beelzebub.

Trying to get through, Jesus tells the stories of the king who holds a wedding banquet for people straight off the street, a great lord who identifies himself with the sick and imprisoned and hungry and naked, and of the good Samaritan—a completely off-the-wall perspective for the nationalistic religionists he was trying to reach.

And he illustrates the universality of his invitation by raising a dead girl, healing women—those that do not count in that society—as well as helping foreigners and infidels.

At the centurion's profession of faith, Jesus speaks so highly one can assume many of his hearers were offended: “When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, ‘I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.’” Luke 7:9.

To the “chosen people,” such an endorsement of a foreigner must have cause much gnashing of teeth. But what of the Greek woman who came asking for healing of her daughter.

For those that watched this scene, just think. Not one from Israel, but a Greek. Not a man, but a woman. Not a son, but a daughter...

“In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit came and fell at his feet. The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter. ‘First let the children eat all they want,’ he told her, ‘for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ she replied, ‘but even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’ Then he told her, ‘For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.’ She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.” Mark 7:25-30.

Even though identified with “dogs,” the woman does not give up her request. And perhaps it was just to provoke these thoughts in the minds of his hearers that Jesus used such a term. For of the miracles that are specifically identified in the gospels, many involve foreigners, aliens, the societal outcasts. There’s a point here, surely.

Jesus even deliberately mentioned such a “pro-foreigner policy,” which made the people in the synagogue at Nazareth mad enough to try to kill him:

“Jesus said to them, ‘Surely you will quote this proverb to me: “Physician, heal yourself! Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.”’ ‘I tell you the truth,’ he continued, ‘no prophet is accepted in his hometown. I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed--only Naaman the Syrian.’ All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff.” Luke 4:23-29.

For Jesus, there is no favoritism, partiality or discrimination—rather an endorsement of eternal principles of truth and right. Over and over again, Jesus actions are the inversion of the ways of this world.

The Radical’s Final Challenge

The final challenge comes at Jesus’ death and resurrection. His death is engineered by those who claimed to be so right and virtuous, the ones who crucified the Lord of glory to save their own misguided concepts of God. These self-righteous hypocrites who hurried home to keep the Sabbath law after executing the Lord of the Sabbath. Those who tithed the herbs in their garden, but ignored the weightier matters...

Even in the final moments, the theme returns. Once the sanctimonious hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders is revealed since they would not touch the “blood money” Judas had returned, even as they arranged Jesus’ judicial murder.

Jesus’ words provide a haunting commentary on those who do evil from a sense of religious justification:

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.... For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 5:10, 20.

In the events of the crucifixion we see demonstrated the essential truths of God’s kingdom. Jesus prays for his torturers. He asks for forgiveness for his crucifiers. He assures the thief on the cross beside him of salvation. He makes arrangements for his mother. In his agony he does not curse or condemn as others would. He experiences God’s withdrawal, yet even so commends himself to God. In this witnessing death, Jesus impresses even the centurion commander of the execution squad who sees divinity there. In the final words of Jesus himself: “It is finished.” It is completed. It is accomplished. It is achieved.

The radical Jesus is radical even in death.

And in the resurrection there is no triumphalistic revenge, no settling of scores with those who killed him. Rather the glorious establishment of the eternal kingdom, guaranteed by God through his giving of Himself to save the dying from their self-destruction. The appearances of Jesus to his followers confirm the establishment of this radical kingdom, so different from those of this world.

The basis for the kingdom? Belief in the radical claims of Jesus, in the radical message of Jesus, and in the radical salvation only available through him.

As Jesus comments to Thomas, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” John 20:29.

For the radical Jesus seeks believers still, challenges them to a life that is very different to those of this world, and invites them to a future completely transformed by the power of God Himself.

(All scripture references from NIV)