

“Taking Jesus Seriously”

a sermon by

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Text: “But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, ‘Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man’” (Luke 5:8).

Someone recently observed that the church today has become uncertain of Jesus, even uncomfortable with him. Several years ago, there was a controversy in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) when a Presbyterian minister by the name of Dick Ficca preached a sermon at the Peacemaking Conference entitled “What’s the Big Deal About Jesus?” Ficca raised a question that is very relevant in our culture today. What is so special about Jesus? Ficca’s question echoed the concern that other theologians have raised. John Hick, in his book *The Myth of God Incarnate*, argues that the Christian emphasis on Jesus is a divisive factor in a world already polarized by religion. Hick argues that the church should ignore the claims of the divinity of Jesus and focus on Jesus simply as one religious leader among many.

I.

This discomfort with Jesus is hardly new. Luke’s gospel tells us of the call of Peter that is related in Luke, chapter 5. Luke tells us that one day, when Jesus was teaching by the Sea of Galilee, a great crowd gathered around him. Things finally became so crowded that Jesus took one of the fishing boats on the shore and cast off away, so that he could speak to the crowds. After he had finished speaking, he said to Simon Peter, “Go out into the deep waters and let down your nets for a catch” (verse 4). Peter was aghast. They had fished all night and had caught nothing. Now, Jesus was telling them to go back and start over.

But Peter did as Jesus commanded. The results were amazing. They caught so many fish that the nets were bursting. In fact, as the boats were returning to the shore, they were so heavy that they began to sink.

At this point, Luke tells us something remarkable. Peter falls down at the feet of Jesus and says to him, “Lord, depart from me, for I am a sinful man.” (vs. 8)

At first that seems like a strange response to make to Jesus. After all, Jesus had instructed Peter to do something and Peter had done it. Peter might have expressed amazement or even gratitude, but to say, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man”—what kind of response is that?

But on second thought, that is what it means to take Jesus seriously and without that, there is no such thing as taking Jesus seriously. Simon Peter is right. When someone takes Jesus seriously, his first response is not that of satisfied admiration, adoration, or worship. It is a cry from the depth of our conscience. There is something terrifying about Jesus. We do not belong to his scale of life. We cannot rise to what he asks of us.

II.

Take, for example, the teachings of Jesus. Many of us admire the Sermon on the Mount. It is one of the most beautiful and engaging ethical discourses in all of literature. The evangelist Dwight L. Moody once told of a man who came to him and said, “Dr. Moody, I am not much of a Christian. I just try to live by the Sermon on the Mount.”

But which one of us could possibly live by the Sermon on the Mount? Do we really believe that we can walk the extra mile, turn the other cheek, return anger with love, refrain from lust, and love our enemies? Reinhold Niebuhr once spoke of the ethic of Jesus as an “impossible possibility.” There is none of us that can satisfy the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount.

Others see in Jesus a kind of personal example. Some years ago, Charles Sheldon wrote a book entitled *In His Steps*, in which he argued that being a Christian was a matter of imitating Christ. Today, there are people who wear bracelets with the initials W.W.J.D. — “What Would Jesus Do?”

Yet, let’s be honest. Is there any one of us who could really do what Jesus did? Are we able to set our face to Jerusalem, to be denied, betrayed, and handed over to our enemies? Are we able to say what Jesus said in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Not my will but thy will be done.”

Do you see what I am trying to say? When one really sees Jesus and takes him seriously—his teaching, his spirit—he can be one of the most intimidating figures in history.

But there is a way out. The New Testament starts with the confession of Peter but it does not end there. All the way through the New Testament are individuals who encountered Jesus and the experience transformed lives.

III.

To begin, those first Christians saw that Jesus was more than Jesus. He was the revelation of God. One of the greatest crises that the church faced was in the early centuries was the question of the relationship of Christ to God. There were those who thought Jesus was like God. He was one revelation, but there were certainly other revelations. Others argued that Jesus was of the same substance with God. One of the decisive moments of faith occurred at the Council of

Nicaea, when the church declared that “insofar as any of us can see God, we see God in Jesus Christ.”

That is what Peter sensed about Jesus. Peter knew there was something in Jesus that he had never seen before. Peter saw that Jesus was more than Jesus. He revealed the Spirit of the living God.

Peter started by crying in shame before Jesus. “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man.” But it was also Peter who said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

N. T. Wright points out in a recent Easter Sermon that the Easter accounts in the New Testament are filled with all kinds of misunderstandings. Mary thinks Jesus’ body has been stolen. Peter sees the linen wrappings in the tomb and isn’t sure what to make of it. The angels question Mary, but she does seem to understand. Then she thinks Jesus is the gardener. It is, as one person has noted, as though these people were struggling to describe something for which they did not have an adequate language.

But there is one thing the early church did not do. It did not downgrade the unique message of Easter. For example, when the Book of Acts tells us that a Roman Centurion came to Peter, asking Peter about the resurrection of Jesus, Peter did not respond by saying, “You have a wonderful faith already; and isn’t it marvelous that we are all on different paths up the same mountain?” Peter says to the centurion, “The God you have been worshiping from afar has come near to you in Jesus, and has done something in Jesus which gives a new shape to world history and a new meaning to human life.” He doesn’t do what many people do today, simply claim Christianity as one truth among many.

IV.

Then, too, those early Christians saw that Jesus had the power to transform human lives. The witness of the New Testament is clear on this. Part of the Easter message is that God’s action in raising Christ from the dead transformed people’s lives.

This power was so dramatic that often it involved changing a person’s name. Simon became Peter, which means “rock,” and he will be the one on whom the church is built. The same is true with Saul. He was the persecutor of the church. But on the road to Damascus he was blinded and his name was changed to Paul.

Through the ages there have been individuals whose lives were transformed by the power of the risen Christ. John Newton was a slaver trader. He was a violent and vicious man who often packed slaves by the hundreds into his ships. But one day John Newton had a transforming experience. He abandoned the slave trade. Later he wrote in a hymn:

“Amazing grace, how sweet the song, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

This effect of transforming lives was one that was extraordinarily far-reaching.

Some years ago, had you lived in London, you might have seen a young man from India, smartly dressed, playing the social scene with success and charm, taking dancing and violin lessons. You might have sized him up as quite a young man about town. What you probably could have never guessed was that this young man was Mahatma Gandhi. Years later, that young man would turn out to be the toothless, half-naked ascetic living on goat's milk, holding in his frail hands the spiritual destinies of India and almost single-handedly forcing the British Empire to reverse its policy toward India. On one occasion, when his biographer visited Gandhi in the little hut where he lived, he found a single picture on the wall—the figure of Christ.

V.

Then again, when those early Christians came face-to-face with Christ, they saw that Jesus was more than the revelation of God. He was more than the one who could transform human life. He was also the savior.

One wonders what Jesus said to Peter, when Peter fell down before him and said, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man.” One can certainly imagine Jesus saying to Peter, “Simon, it is because you are sinful that I have come to you. Those who are sick do not need a doctor. I am the good physician.”

Paul Tillich once observed that there are fewer words that are stranger to us than the words “sin” and “grace.” They have certainly been misused in the church, but that misuse should not diminish their power. Sin, notes Tillich, is our state of separation. We are separated from God, from others, and even from ourselves.

“Where sin abounds,” writes the Apostle Paul, “grace abounds even more.” I do not believe he wrote those words to be sentimental or even to suggest that there is a happy ending for every human situation. I think he wrote those words because on that road to Damascus when he had experienced his greatest separation from God and from others, he found himself accepted in spite of being rejected. And when he found that he was accepted, he was able to accept others as well.

That is what we mean by salvation. It is when God's grace overwhelms even our greatest separation, and we who are lost now are found.

There is a moment when a wave of light breaks into our darkness and we hear the word of God's love for us in Jesus Christ. When that happens to us, we experience grace. We may not be better than before, we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed. For in that moment, grace conquers sin, and reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement.

There is a great deal of talk today about the need for the renewal of the church. But it is hard to imagine that any renewal is possible until the church takes Jesus seriously.

And when that happens, it will be the beginning of something greater than any of us could imagine.

Amen!