

Jesus Did Not Start a Religion

For most of my life, until the past five years or so, I was seeing God all wrong. Ten years ago, I started writing a book, *Jesus Did Not Start a Religion*, and trying to make sense of my life, even the religion in which I had been raised. I was hurting and grieving. My parents divorced after many years of marriage, and the way the church handled the divorce made me never want to be a Christian again. I was hurting from many of the mistakes I had made as a young man, and hurting as I watched the world fall apart, afraid that it might be the end. I was hurting because a friend tried to steal a business from me, and feeling incredibly alone. I was grieving. I can see that now, in hindsight.

In the midst of all my grieving, the Lord showed up one night. I had not been to a church service in more than a year, and I was avoiding most every Christian I had known. I felt safer in bars than I did at the church, but I still loved Jesus. He had long ago won my heart, and we were clearly too close to let go of all those years being together. It might sound ridiculous, but I would talk to Him often when I would get drunk. I would preach sometimes to other broken-hearted people at the bars and parties I would attend. In the middle of those sad years, one unexpected night, the Lord showed up!

He woke me up around two in the morning, and I could feel His presence in the room. I simply said, "Yes, Lord?"

He responded with one simple line, "Robert, I never started a religion."

When He said it, I felt like Neo (from *The Matrix*) when he had Kung Fu downloaded into him. When the Lord spoke that one line to me it was like a whole new revelation had been downloaded

into my soul. My whole life changed after that. And I would never be the same again.

I started to read the Bible again, trying to find religion in it. Many things stood out to me about Jesus' life and message, and it was becoming clear: Jesus did things very differently than we do, as merely religious people. In some ways now, I think Jesus was perfect religion, but in our culture, religion has an organizational and institutional vibe to it; and this, Jesus did not. In fact, some of those organizational and institutional powers, those false religious men, were the ones who ended up killing Him. What started to jump off the page to me was how differently Jesus ministered. And I started to realize how little I actually knew Him, even though I had known Him some 20 years of my life.

The more I read the Word of God without all the religious additions and deletions, the clearer and clearer the story became: Jesus is so much better than I had ever thought! For much of my life, I had esteemed men of an earthly power or prominence. You know the type: alpha-male, driven, charismatic, witty, outspoken, ambitious, opinionated and strong. Many of the men I grew to admire in my 20s I have come to learn represented little of Christ in us, the hope of glory. Yet as a culture, even as a Christian culture, these are the men of esteem, the men of renown, the men our younger men are taught to emulate and admire. But Jesus was very different.

It will surprise us when we finally see Him, face to face. If we were to go back in time and walk with Him those years when He was a man like us, we would all be very surprised by what He was like. But His attributes like meekness, quietness, gentleness, patience, open-heartedness, empathy, honesty and boldness in truth are not the character traits often esteemed among men, even among us Christians. I am convinced that the disciples had such a hard time believing in Him as Messiah because He was nothing like the person they were expecting,

the “King” of the Jews.

Isaiah tells us that Jesus wasn't very attractive (Isa. 53:2). Often the disciples would start to bicker right in front of Him, and Jesus would hardly respond, not until they directly asked Him (Matt. 18). He didn't even respond to all the accusations made against Him, even though surely He could have corrected them. He was known as being quiet, broken, sorrowful but also capable of great passion and boldness in the right moment. He was not afraid, and spoke the truth sometimes so directly that they wanted to kill Him on the spot. But He also let His friend Judas betray Him with a kiss and did not stop him. What a different kind of a man!

The truth is, they not only beat Him the day before He was crucified, but they beat Him throughout most of His ministry: every time they rejected Him and a crowd rose up against Him, every time they did not give God glory for all the amazing things He was doing for them, it was as if they were spitting in His face. He was the suffering Messiah. He was the most loving man to have ever walked the earth. But a loving man who is willing to suffer for others is not often what we esteem as a culture. And so we often refuse to see Him for who He truly is, we redefine Him, we attempt to pervert the beauty, the love and the perfection of The Son of God. It's sad that we do this.

We have such ugliness inside of us. And He is so lovely. We have such fear and doubt, and He was so full of faith, hope and love. We are so often cowards, and He was so bold, so unafraid. I know a group of pastors who would preach that Jesus was rich. They would preach that Peter owned fishing boats and was wealthy; and that Paul was a businessman, making and selling tents. But rarely have I heard someone follow Peter's true example, leaving all that they have behind and coming to walk with Jesus (Matt. 19:27-30)

The truth is, we are just too afraid to see Jesus for who He

really is. We are too afraid to accept the fullness of this gospel, and so we build our own kind of religion. We refuse to see Jesus as He actually is, and so we lack the power of God, who is hidden in Christ. Trying to do things our own way, we have rebuilt Babe; we have returned to Babylon and have refused to return to the city of God. It's sad but it's true. And yet even still, Jesus died for us. Knowing how we would mistreat the holy and precious things of God, He still died for us!

He is so different than we are. Many times throughout my life and even ministry, I would have destroyed the people of God if I had had the chance. I was so angry at the apathy of the church and the unconcern for the holy things of God. I was so hard on people. I became way too strong and even in Jesus name. I felt so justified in being God's hand of judgment, like an Old Testament prophet; *After all*, I would say to myself, *They just won't listen*. I was exactly like James and John wanting to call down fire on the places and people who wouldn't receive (my) Jesus. I am certain I have chopped off dozens of ears, and worse, along my journey trying to minister Jesus. I am grateful He can pick those ears up off the ground and heal the people I have hurt.

Clearly Jesus was nothing like me. He is little like any of us. He never turned His disciples away; did you ever notice that? He never grew tired of them letting Him down. He even knew Judas would betray Him, that Peter would deny Him, Jesus knew everyone who abandoned Him in the end for fear that they too might be punished and suffer. He knew just how horrible they were; He knew just how messed-up we all are, and yet He died for us. He lived for us and then He died for us; and now He lives for us, forevermore. It's such a beautiful story: a beautiful story about an amazing, powerful, loving and beautiful God.

John writes to us. In I John 3:1-3, he is encouraging us to "see Jesus." "Behold," John writes. And then he explains to us

a mystery. "We shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3:2b). There is something about looking at Jesus for who He truly is that changes us. It's like the Communion ("commune," of course; it means to have fellowship), we eat of His flesh and drink of His blood. We look upon Him, we see Him for who He really is and just how loving He is, we take Him inside of our body and He becomes a part of us; and we are changed, forever. We become something totally new! It's not just Robert anymore but now it's Christ in Robert, the hope of glory!

The true story is so much better than what so many of us have been taught. We need to go to Jesus! We need to spend a lot more time with Him, dwelling in this anointing we have received (1 John 2:27). He is going to change everything; in truth, He already has. Now we are to receive the fullness of His blessing! But who will come? Who will truly receive Jesus, not the religious Jesus but the real Jesus? The ones who receive the fullness of Christ will also receive the fullest reward! It's the gospel we have been given, the gospel of the kingdom.

So now we approach Him. We approach Him because He is so approachable. He isn't going to turn us away. He isn't going to cast us off or forget about us when we mess up. He isn't going to give up on us. We will give up on ourselves, but He will never stop believing in us. He is the perfect God. He is the perfect Father. So now, we approach the throneroom of grace and there find mercy. We go to Him, we sit at His feet, learn of His ways and become the children of God, in spirit and in truth.

It's such a privilege! We are so unbelievably blessed. We will see it one day. One day we will get it: We were the ones who got to know Jesus. Maybe we won't really understand until we get to heaven. But one day, we will truly behold Him, and everything will change.

Maybe even sooner than we think. {eoa}

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