

Was Jesus a 'Feel-Good' Preacher?

We live in an age of “feel goodism” in a super-sensitive society in which people are offended by any perceived slight. Politically correct police patrol the air waves, red-flag certain buzzwords and label those who use them as bigots, racists, sexists and extremists. Freedom of speech is under attack, especially religious speech, which is often tagged “hate speech” by secularists who reject biblical truth. Paul warned Timothy, “For the time will come when people will not endure sound doctrine, but they will gather to themselves teachers in accordance with their own desires, having itching ears, and they will turn their ears away from the truth and turn to myths” (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

Contrary to some opinions, Jesus wasn't always a Mr. Nice Guy who never offended anyone with His words and carefully avoided controversy. Some people have the misguided notion that Jesus was a “feel-good” preacher who was always sweet, kind, diplomatic and never made waves or rocked the boat. Are you kidding me? What Bible have they been reading?

Jesus offended many people with unvarnished truth that made them feel uncomfortable (John 6:60-61). The late Jamie Buckingham expressed this reality in his clever book title, *The Truth Will Set You Free, But First It Will Make You Miserable*. Sometimes the truth hurts; it hits us right between the eyes and cuts like a knife. Jesus didn't preach what I call “cotton candy sermons” that are in vogue today—fluffy strings of sugar-coated thoughts woven together to make people feel good, but containing little spiritual substance. In fact, Mark 12:37 (NKJV) indicates that “The common people heard Him gladly,” probably because He told the truth without any religious pretenses or pulling any punches. But make no mistake, not everyone heard Jesus gladly.

I'm not suggesting Jesus intentionally offended people, but the truth He spoke had a way of separating the wheat from the chaff, the sheep from the goats. To be clear, Jesus was loving, graceful, compassionate and tender-hearted toward the outcasts and downtrodden of society. In fact, He went out of His way to visit where others refused to go. Most Jews, due to prejudice, traveled around Samaria. Jesus deliberately went through it and broke down cultural and racial barriers by even speaking to "the Woman at the well" (John 4:4-9). Some things He did were considered scandalous in His culture—touching and healing lepers, befriending publicans and sinners, allowing a "sinful" woman to touch/anoint Him (Luke 7:36-39), healing on the Sabbath day and so forth. He worked outside the lines of social norms for a Jewish man, especially a rabbi.

Even His own cousin, John the Baptist, didn't fully understand Him. He sent messengers asking, "Are you He who should come, or do we look for another?" (Matt. 11:3). Jesus responded by telling how people were being healed and receiving the gospel, but then added this tagline, "Blessed is he who is not offended because of Me" (Matt. 11:6, NKJV). Apparently, John was offended by Jesus. Why? He was suffering in prison while Jesus was socializing at dinner parties with sinners. Jesus' style and methods didn't fit the mold of what John expected in a Messiah.

Sad to say, Jesus would not be welcome in many modern churches. He challenged the status quo, ruffled feathers, made enemies and attacked the religious establishment. Jesus showed compassion to sinners, but He also confronted their sin (John 4:18, 8:11). He was very critical of corrupt religious leaders and even called people by some unflattering names:

- He called Herod Antipas, who killed his brother, Philip, and stole his wife, Herodias, a "fox" (Luke 13:32). Foxes are predators who prey on weaker animals, so Jesus was calling Herod out on his abuse of power.

- Jesus nicknamed James and John “Boanerges” meaning “sons of thunder” (Mark 3:17), which was not a compliment, but a dig at their loud-mouthed, hot-headed, quick-tempered, prejudiced ways (Luke 9:49-56).
- He called Peter “Satan” for trying to interfere with God’s plan for Him to go to the cross (Matt. 16:21-23).
- He called Judas Iscariot a “devil” and the “son of perdition” for his treachery (John 6:70; 17:12).
- He called His own disciples “doubters” with little faith when He calmed a storm (Matt. 8:26), a “faithless and perverse generation” when they failed to cast out a demon (Matt. 17:17), and “fools” and “slow of heart to believe” when they doubted His resurrection (Luke 24:25).
- Jesus reserved His strongest verbal barbs for the self-righteous religious leaders. In Matthew 23, He called them “blind,” “blind guides,” “serpents,” “generation of vipers,” “fools” and “hypocrites.”

Jesus’ blunt words didn’t always make His hearers feel warm and fuzzy, but, as the old saying goes, “If the shoe fits, wear it.” Truth is like medicine, it doesn’t always taste good initially, but it will help heal you eventually. Jesus’ strange sayings are sometimes hard to swallow, but they are words of life and salvation. Any skilled surgeon will hurt you first in the process of healing you. Jesus’ sermons were often surgical—short-term pain in exchange for long-term gain. He performed spiritual surgery on people’s hearts with the sharp scalpel of His words.

Some thought Jesus was “mean” when he “put out” the mocking mourners before He raised Jairus’ daughter from the dead (Mark 5:40-41). Others thought He was too extreme when He wove a whip and drove the greedy moneychangers from the Temple (John 2:15). Remember, He’s both the lion and the lamb—the perfect

balance of the tough and tender sides of love. In an age when preachers walk on eggshells to avoid saying anything negative or offensive, the Good Shepherd feeds His sheep what they need not just what they want to hear. The truth won't always make us feel good, but it will make us free. So, let's keep speaking the truth in love and let the chips fall where they may. {eo}

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