

**“Who Is Jesus?”**  
**Matthew 11:16–19, 25–30**  
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**July 9, 2023**

Who is Jesus? It seems like such a simple, straightforward question, especially in the church, but how many thousands of books have been written in response to this question? The matter is not completely resolved. We are, after all, talking about a man who has had billions of followers, one we claim is both human and divine. And in this time, as much as any before, we see Jesus through dramatically different cultural and ideological lenses.

For example, in her recent book *Jesus and John Wayne*, historian Kristin Kobes Du Mez documents the development of a macho image of Jesus which has shaped views of men and women and an entire political movement. Jesus is a pumped-up tough guy who wants men to be like him, women to be subservient, and outsiders to be pushed to the curb. At the other end of the spectrum, starting in the late 1960s, so-called Jesus Freaks viewed Jesus as being much more meek and mild, a reverent flower child who called his followers to make peace, not war.

To be honest, the latter has some resonance with the Jesus we find in the Bible while the former, a dominant influence for many evangelicals today, has none, but many images like these have their own beginning places and agendas, and they only look to scripture for post-facto rationalization, if they look to scripture at all. In other words, we can make Jesus into whomever we want or need him to be. But who is Jesus really — for us, for the church, for this time and all times?

Noting our inevitable biases and filters, the faithful look first to scripture, passages like the one we have read today from Matthew 11 which speak to who Jesus is. In fact, the entire eleventh chapter of this Gospel addresses Jesus’ identity. The chapter begins with John the Baptizer wondering from prison if Jesus is the Messiah or not. So, he sends some of his disciples to ask. As we join the story, Jesus is talking about how others question not only his identity but that of anyone who claims a sacred calling.

John is said to have a demon because he is too rigid while Jesus is viewed as a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners; he is too carefree.

Jesus' identity is not embraced by all. So, he talks about who he is, giving an answer to John's disciples. He alludes to who he is in his conversation with God. And he demonstrates who he is with an invitation to the weary. But he is under no illusion that this resolves the matter. So he says, "Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds," referencing Proverbs 24. In other words, the proof is in the pudding. We discover who Jesus is not by rational argument but through personal experience.

But to the extent to which scripture tries to tell us who Jesus is, what can we learn from our text? When John's disciples ask if he is the one to come, Jesus says, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." This is who I am, Jesus says, the one who brings healing and compassion, the one who demonstrates a special concern for the poor.

It is not what many expect from a Messiah. They want a pumped-up tough guy who will wipe out the Romans! But this is not who Jesus is; it is not how he works, then or now. His path is service and sacrificial love, laying down life for others. It's why he says, "And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." He knows it is not what many expect, and this is understandable in the first century.

But how is it that even now in the twenty-first century, with the benefit of hindsight, knowing about the cross — how can people still look to Jesus as a violent crusader who calls followers to acts of meanness and exclusion, of power grabbing and favoring the rich? One can hold any of these views, but to attach to them to Jesus of Nazareth requires a fundamental ignorance of his character or dishonesty about it.

Jesus is the one who extends compassion through our clothing ministry — to the poor and needy, to the immigrant and refugee, to the volunteer who needs kindness too, as well as a sense of purpose. Jesus is the one who is with us when we pray for a loved one to get well, when we seek comfort in a time

of loss, when we seek grace when we have let even ourselves down, like the Apostle Paul writing in Romans 7. Jesus is the one who is with the down and out, the marginalized and outcast, those who are judged even by a church that claims his name. This is who Jesus is, he says so, and in no uncertain terms.

He also says he is the one who invites all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens to draw near to him and find rest. He does go on to say, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” We may question the latter part of this. Jesus’ yoke is his way of service, the way of the cross. Is there anything “light” about that? As Will Campbell once noted, Jesus does not say, “Take up your cross and relax!”

But there are different kinds of weariness — the kind that comes from doing too much, worrying too much; and the kind that comes from searching for our identity and purpose, our reason for being. The former can wear us down, the latter even more so. Jesus offers rest from labor and a peace that comes with finding our place and calling. And he offers these gifts to everyone — *all* who are weary and carrying heavy burdens.

Most churches say they welcome everyone, but many do not. There are rules, written or unwritten, about who is welcome and who is not. Some will say that all are welcome, so long as they don’t fall into some category as dreaded sinner. But, again reflecting on what the Apostle Paul says about himself in Romans 7, he would not be welcome in such churches which view Jesus more as a school disciplinarian than a Good Shepherd. Sin is sin, we all have it in our lives. Grace is grace, we all need it. And just because someone is different doesn’t make them more sinful. But regardless of all this, Christ extends welcome to all.

We have an image of this welcoming Jesus on the large stained glass portrait of Christ the Good Shepherd just above the choir loft. Some sanctuaries have nowhere to focus our vision. A seminary professor of mine once pointed this out to a fundamentalist mega-church pastor who was a part of the takeover of the SBC years ago. That church had just spent over 50 million dollars, in the late 1980s, and the pastor wanted to know what this professor thought of it. “There is nothing that takes your eye and moves your

heart in it,” he said, not with malice, but this pretty much ended the conversation.

Some sanctuaries have no place to focus. This one has a majestic image of the Shepherd Christ welcoming all and inviting all to find rest. Even if the sermon doesn’t speak to us — I am in touch with reality, it does happen — even if the music fails to move us, we can reflect on this image of Christ and what it means, trusting that it is an image grounded in scripture and in synch with our own personal experience with Jesus.

There is one other thing Jesus tells us about himself in our text. He reveals the character of God. In his face, we see the face of God, and thus we catch a glimpse of who we are meant to be, since we are, according to scripture, created in the image of God. This means that God is one who extends compassion and healing to all in need. God is one who invites all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens to draw near and find rest. God is one who calls us to find our peace in service.

As is the case with how we see Jesus, how we see God has a profound effect upon how we see the world around us and how we live. Those who worship an angry, judgmental God tend to live in fear for self and hostility toward others. Those who worship a merciful and compassionate God tend to live at peace with themselves and with a yearning to help others. It’s not a matter of choosing a belief system with better results. It’s a matter of trusting in who God really is and living in light of this truth that Jesus reveals to us.

There is a scene in the film “Forest Gump” in which Lieutenant Dan says, “Have you found Jesus yet, Gump?” Forest replies, “I didn’t know I was supposed to be looking for him, sir.” The good news is Jesus is not lost, but at times we are, so he is looking for us. We long for a relationship with him, and through that relationship, we find understanding. It is ever a work in progress, but if we begin with what scripture teaches us about a gentle servant who extends compassion and invites all to find rest, we will be headed in the right direction.