

“Christians Should Follow Jesus’ Model”

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May 23, 2021

“WWJD?” In 1989 a youth minister from Holland, MI., Jamie Tinklenberg, made 300 bracelets with those four letters. She had just read the book published in the 1890’s by a man named Charles Sheldon entitled, “In His Steps – What Would Jesus Do.” Soon all sorts of people wanted a bracelet and Tinklenberg hired a company to manufacture more. Unfortunately, for her, she was unable to reserve the trademark... because it came from a book published 100 years earlier. Soon the letters WWJD were seen on bracelets, t-shirts, and various apparel and products all around the world. I’m sure at least a few folks here today have some item with those letters on. Now, on the surface “what would Jesus do?” is a great question. I sometime say we should strive to be more Christ-like in our thoughts and attitudes. Charles Spurgeon, the 19th century Baptist pastor, who is one of my heroes, once preached a sermon that repeatedly echoed that question. When facing a decision, it may be a very good idea to ask “What would Jesus do?” and then make the choice that seems consistent with that.

Yet, there are two ways that the WWJD question can lead us astray. First, there are things Jesus did that we should not do. Jesus walked on water...we cannot do that, unless the water is frozen. Jesus told people their sins against God were forgiven. We are not able to do that. When Jesus’ friend died, He brought him back to life. Most likely when a friend dies, we should focus on comforting family members. As the Son of God and Messiah, Jesus has a very unique role and there are numerous things He did that we should not try to imitate.

The second, and really a far more dangerous problem, will be our focus today. This is when people start thinking that trying to follow Jesus’ model, rather than trusting in Him, is what Christianity is all about. This is the error J. Gresham Machen, another hero, warned about when he said, “some people want Jesus to be the example of our faith, not the object of our faith.” Now some of you, maybe most of you, are thinking, “Pastor Dan, I am not sure I follow your point.” That’s okay, for now. I hope by the end of this sermon you will understand exactly what I mean and why it is so important that Jesus be *the object* of our faith. Let’s pause and pray the Lord

would speak to us today through His word and spirit.

Friends, this is the second in our series of “Harmful Half-Truths.” When people say we should follow Jesus’ model, there is obvious truth in that statement. We should always seek to imitate Jesus in loving God and loving other people. I believe this world would be a much better place if we would show the same type of compassion toward others as Jesus did. In fact, I would say it is a good thing to seek to imitate Jesus, as long as *we trust Him as our savior, and worship Him as our Lord*. Some of you are thinking, “Well, of course, Pastor Dan. That is obvious.” Not to everyone. We are going to look at two distortions, dangerous distortions, that can occur when we emphasize following Jesus’ model.

First, is a distortion of who Jesus truly is. Some folks view following Jesus’ model as *an alternative* to worshiping Him. For example, Philip Gulley is a Quaker pastor in Indiana. He is a very engaging writer and says “Jesus is a model for living, more than an object of worship.” He then talks about how Jesus’ virgin birth, sinless life, and many miracles He performed were just stories created by the early Christians to get people to believe Jesus was a divine being and worship Him. He insists, “the church’s worship of Jesus is something Jesus would not have favored.”

Say what? Yes, it sounds crazy, but it is what many so called liberal Christians, or emergent Christians, or progressive Christians, have claimed for over 100 years. Why? Because they want to embrace and proclaim Jesus as a great human teacher, but not as the divine Son of God. They find that view of Jesus much more palatable for a couple of reasons. First, it eliminates all the miracles surrounding Jesus’ life and ministry which they often find embarrassing. These folks have often embraced a *scientific naturalism* which says miracles are impossible and that those who believe they occur, are naïve. They insist Jesus, the great human teacher, is the type of religious leader modern people need in the 21st century. Second, if Jesus is merely a great human teacher and not the divine Son of God, then He is inclusive, not exclusive. Their idea is that people from all different religions can then appreciate

His teaching, but still be Muslim, Buddhists, Hindus, or even atheists. If we see Jesus as merely a great teacher, there would be none of what they consider narrow, “Jesus is the only way to heaven” stuff. This, they claim, is what causes so much conflict between Christianity and other religions. That is what some people believe.

However, C. S. Lewis completely refuted their thinking in this passage in “Mere Christianity.” He wrote, “I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

This, is built on what is called Lewis’ trilemma... Liar, Lunatic, or Lord? If Jesus made false claims about Himself, whether He believed them or not, He could not be a great teacher. He would be either a liar or a lunatic. But if the claims He made about Himself are true, then He is far more than a great teacher. What are some of the claims He made about Himself? Well He says things like, **John 10:30 “I and the Father are one.”** And **John 14:9 “He who has seen me has seen the Father.”** And He makes claims that only God can make. He speaks of His eternal existence. **John 8:58 “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.”** And then, **Revelation 1:17b, 18 “I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.”** Jesus says He has the power to forgive sins. **Matthew 9:6a “But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.”** And He accepted worship, in a first century Jewish culture where the number one rule was “worship no one but God.” The wisemen worship Jesus (Matthew 2:11) and the disciples worship Jesus (Matthew 14:23 and 28:9). After a

blind man was given sight by Jesus **John 9:38 “He said ‘Lord, I believe,’ and he worshipped him.”** These type of things caused the apostle John to write **John 1:1-4 “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men.”** **John 1:14 “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”** It caused the apostle Thomas to call Jesus, “ My Lord, my God.” (John 20;20). It is why the apostle Paul writes **Philippians 2:6 “Christ Jesus, who , though he was in the very form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.”** – meaning to be held on to. He also says we as Christians are **Titus 2:13 “waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.”**

Friends, that was who Jesus claimed to be and who His apostles said He was and is. So how can people say He was only a great teacher, and not someone to be worshipped? Well, they do so not by claiming Jesus was a liar, lunatic, but that He was a legend. They insist Jesus never really said most of those things and the bible gospels contain words Jesus’ followers put in His mouth. That is how Phil Gulley can say “the church’s worship of Jesus is something Jesus would not have favored.” However, there is really no evidence for that claim. It is almost pure speculation, that contradicts both the evidence and logic. All the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament contain these passages pointing to Jesus being God the Son. There is no evidence that the early church tried to distort Jesus’ message and ministry. Two hundred and some years later, long after the apostles had died, so called gnostic Christians would try to change Jesus’ message. And many today, seem fascinated with the gnostic distortions because in their view, they make Jesus more “human.”

Yet, this question needs to be asked: If these folks are right, if Jesus was not the eternal Son of God, why should we consider Him a great teacher? Why even pay attention to the moral reflections of a Jewish peasant, with little formal education, who lived 2000 years ago. It is because of who Jesus is – God the Son - that what He says, what He

teaches, is even worth considering. Yet, because of who Jesus is, God the Son, what He teaches must not only be considered, but obeyed. As God the Son, His word is authoritative, and above any other authority. What the experts say, what the psychologists and sociologists say, what other religious teachers or philosophers say, really means little compared to what the Son of God says. Because Jesus is the Son of God it makes all the difference in the world.

Friends, this is a reminder for us that even though it is good to seek to follow Jesus' model of loving God and loving others, the most important thing is that we believe He is the Son of God, that we confess Him as the Son of God, and that we obey Him as the Son of God. Recognizing who Jesus truly is, and responding to who He truly is, that is the foundation upon which the Christian life is built.

Second, Dangerous distortion that often occurs when we focus on simply following Jesus' model is that we lose sight of the gospel. The truths of the gospel are not necessarily denied, they are just obscured by an emphasis on trying to imitate Jesus; model. As a result, people fall into the trap of "moralism." This means they start thinking that "trying to be a good person" is what pleases God and what makes one a Christian. Now, again we have some half-truths involved here. Should you try to be a good person? Well, you certainly should not strive to be a bad person, so yes, trying to be a good person is a positive thing. Yet, we need to be careful that we don't get confused and lose sight of essential truths the bible teaches.

The essential truth I have in mind is this: the basis of our salvation, the basis of our relationship with God is not what we do, but what Jesus Christ has done for us. His death on the cross in our place, paying the penalty for our sins, is what enables us to experience God's salvation. It is not anything we do, but what Jesus did. The apostle Paul spells this out in **Ephesians 2:8,9 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.** I like how the NLT puts it **Ephesians 2: 8,9 God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.** This is the basis of our understanding that

salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, for the glory of God alone.

Yet, when the focus is following Jesus' model, this truth tends to get obscured. And when that happens our Christian faith can be corrupted. Unfortunately, I see that happening with different people I know. One of them is my friend, Joe. You have never met him, but Joe is like a lot of folks, especially younger people, who want to focus on following Jesus' model because they want a faith that is more relevant and real. Rather than get involved in theological discussions, Joe wants to actually be helping people. So, he has been volunteering to serve dinner at the Salvation Army two nights a week. He is also helping at the local food shelf every Thursday. Joe has become very careful about how he spends his money. He saves as much as he can, and then gives almost all of that to World Vision, an organization combating hunger and poverty around the globe. Joe told me, "Dan, I am doing the type of things Jesus would do." Now, I think it is wonderful that Joe is involved with these things. It is especially wonderful when I know that a few years ago the focus of his life was basically just having a good time.

Yet, there are some things that concern me. For one, Joe is pretty critical of other Christians who he says are not doing enough to help people in need. He compares what he sees as their lack of commitment and compassion, to what he has been doing. It kind of sounds like boasting. Even more disturbing is that Joe has been listening to some podcasts by a couple of guys who question the bible teaching of what Jesus accomplished through His death on the cross. When I ask Joe about that, he replies, "Hey these guys are really good at talking about how Christians need to be helping the poor. Don't get so hung up on the doctrine stuff, Dan. Christians are always arguing about that. Jesus cares a lot more about how we treat each other, than He does about what we believe." I say, "Sorry, Joe." That is simply not true. Nowhere in the bible do we read that teaching or doctrine is not important. Joe, it is not either or, but both and both our practice and doctrine should be honoring to the Lord. **1 Timothy 4:16 "Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers."**

Yes, Joe, Christians should be committed to helping people, especially those who lack basic necessities. Sometimes we as Christians have not helped the poor as we should. But that doesn't mean that bible doctrine or teaching is not important. And one of the most essential doctrines of all is that our salvation comes by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ alone. The foundation of that teaching is that Jesus paid the penalty for our sins on the cross. As He died, He absorbed the wrath of God in our place. That is the basis for our salvation. Joe, I think it is great that you are using your time, energy and money to help others. I probably should be doing more of that. But, it does trouble me that your focus seems to be solely on what you are doing for others, rather than on what Jesus Christ has done for you. The foundation of Christianity is not what we do for the Lord, or for other people, but on what Jesus has done, is doing and will do for us through His death and resurrection. Joe, I just want to make sure you are trusting not in the good things you are doing, but in Jesus Christ and in the exceedingly good things He has done for you.

And friends, that is my concern for each one of you. Are you trusting in and what He has done for you? I you are not or if you are not sure, or if you are not even sure what that means, please make sure you talk to me or pastor Mark soon. **Ephesians 2: 8,9 For by grace you have been save through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.** Wonderful verses of gospel truth, but we need to note what the Lord, through the apostle Paul, tells us in the next verse **Ephesian 2:10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which god prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.**

Friends, when you are trusting in Jesus as your Savior, when you are worshipping Jesus as the risen Lord, then it is time to ask the question: What would Jesus do? The Lord doesn't want us to choose between right belief and right practice, between sound doctrine and loving deeds, between faith and works. He wants us to embrace both. Yes, it begins with believing the truth about Jesus, who He is, what He has done for us, trusting in Him, receiving Jesus as Savior and Lord. That is the first step, that is where we need to start. But, once we are believers in Jesus, we are called to follow His model of love, expressing love for God

and for other people. Yet, remember what really fuels our love for God and for other people is His love for us. **John 4:19 says "We love Him because He first loved us."** **John 4:11 says "If god so loved us, we ought also to love one another."** Experiencing God's grace produces gratitude in our lives, gratitude that we have received His totally undeserved favor. That gratitude grows in love, love for the Lord and love for those around us. Imitating Jesus, following His model, doing what Jesus would do, is not an alternative to a focus on the gospel of grace, salvation through faith in Jesus's death and resurrection. Rather it grows out of that gospel. Friends, by God's grace may we indeed trust in Jesus Christ as Savior, worship Him as our Lord, and follow Him as our model.