

Who is Jesus?

The Unerring Teacher

Before I talk about Jesus, the Unerring Teacher, I want to talk about another great teacher whom Princetonians consider to be almost just as flawless, Professor Cornel West. Though I haven't had the privilege of taking a class with Professor West (or even meeting him for that matter), I know he's a 'baller' in every sense of the word. What other Princeton professor can say he contributed to the Civil Rights movement and made appearances in both *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions*? Despite his reputation for being one of the premier Princeton professors, West would jeopardize his entire career if he were to suddenly break the news that he is indeed God in the flesh. Imagine Professor West concluding an incredible lecture on race in America with this confession: "Oh, and by the way class, I'm God. Alright, see you tomorrow!" If anyone could claim to be God and get away with it, maybe Cornel West could pull it off. But I have a feeling not even Professor West could make such a claim without facing intense criticism.

So how does Jesus escape such hostility from so many despite having made this very claim over 2,000 years ago? Many people take the comfortable position of labeling Jesus as simply a great moral teacher, another Socrates or Cornel West, but in doing so they ignore the most unique, shocking, and central point of his teaching. How could someone revere Jesus as a wise teacher if he thinks Jesus is dead wrong on his most fundamental claim—that he is in fact God?

True, Jesus is among the most consequential moral teachers ever to live, and the tremendous influence of his teaching is obvious to Christians and non-Christians alike. This is why, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky writes, "Even those who have renounced Christianity and attack it, in their inmost being still follow the Christian ideal, for hitherto neither their subtlety nor the ardour of their hearts has been able to create a higher ideal of man and of virtue than the ideal given by Christ of old."ⁱ And more close to home, Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Jesus Christ was an extremist for love, truth and goodness."ⁱⁱ Jesus made several radical ethical claims, such as "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," (Matthew 5:44) and "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant" (Mark 10:43).

Yet it is not the ethical claims Jesus made but rather the claims he made about himself that elicit more of a definite response from us. If Jesus only told others to "Love your neighbor as yourself," then it is acceptable to just call him a gifted moral teacher and get on with our lives. But he did not stop there. He went on to claim about himself, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30) and "Anyone who has seen *me* has seen the Father" (John 14:9). He claimed to be God on multiple occasions! This explains why the chief priests wanted him crucified for blasphemy. They knew very well that Jesus was not just laying out a moral code in his teaching; he was claiming to be on equal footing with the Most High God.

What does this mean for us? The bottom line is this—no one should be able to settle for calling Jesus merely a good teacher and nothing more. For if Jesus really was a good teacher, would he still be admired if he lied about being God? Or would people still take him seriously after he made this outrageous claim to deity? Either he is telling us the truth about himself, or he is completely ruining his "good teacher" reputation. Calling him a good teacher without granting that he is the Son of God as he claimed to be is simply not an option. C.S. Lewis put it this way: "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."

The reality is this—Jesus demands more from us than just a tip of our hat for his sound moral teaching. In light of his claims, Jesus calls each of us to either totally reject him as a nut case for saying he is God or to take a stand and accept him as God incarnate. There will be no riding the fence with him.

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ⁱ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Trans. David McDuff, (New York: Penguin Group, 1993), 437.

ⁱⁱ Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," April, 1963.