

The Attractiveness of Jesus

Rivne Lecture #5

Introduction: According to the New Testament books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, during Jesus' lifetime he attracted large crowds of people who wanted to see Him, sometimes to touch Him, and to hear what He had to say. Especially while He was in Galilee, large crowds followed Him everywhere, so much so that at times He had to escape from them into the hills simply in order to have an opportunity to pray. On another occasion at the Sea of Galilee, such large crowds were pressing in to hear Him that He had to get into a boat in order to teach them without being crushed. As Jesus traveled to Jerusalem to be crucified, a blind man cried out to Him in desperation, and a tax collector climbed up in a tree to catch a glimpse of Him.

- A. In one sense it isn't so amazing that people wanted to see and hear and follow Jesus. After all, He could do miraculous things.
- B. What is amazing is that so many people *still* want to follow Jesus, even after the lapse of twenty-one centuries. In fact, the number of Christians in the world has more than quadrupled in the last one hundred years, from approximately 100 million in 1910 to more than two billion in 2010. It seems that the further we get from Jesus historically, the more people want to follow Him.
- C. But why? What accounts for this historical phenomenon? I'd like to suggest that it's because Jesus is such an attractive figure, even at the distance of more than 2000 years.

1. His Personality is attractive.

- A. We often forget that Jesus was, in addition to being Israel's Messiah and God's Son, an actual human being. As such, He had a human personality, and one that tended to draw people to Him.
- B. For example, in one instance when people were bringing their children to Him for His blessing, His disciples felt that such behavior was inappropriate. After all, Jesus had a limited time on earth and was here on kingdom business, not to spend time with children! So, they rebuked the people who were pressing around Him with their children. But Jesus rebuked them! "Let the little children come to me, and do not forbid them," He said, "for the kingdom belongs to such as these." We can only imagine how much more that caused the people – including the little children – to love Him.
- C. The Bible also indicates that Jesus had a special concern for those who found themselves on the margins of Jewish society. This included non-Jews, Samaritans (who were half-Jewish, half-Gentile), the sick, tax collectors, people with low moral reputations, those who were marginalized by the Jewish religious leaders because they weren't "holy enough" according to their standards. Jesus welcomed them all and made them feel that they were worthwhile, that the God of heaven cared about them and had a place for them in His kingdom.
- D. Jesus was not in the business of rejecting or condemning people who were hurting. To be sure, He had a powerful message of condemnation for those who pretended to be righteous when they were not, or for those who were consumed by their own pride and self-importance. But to those who were hurting and simply needed to know they mattered, Jesus extended the utmost mercy.

- E. One indication of Jesus' compassion that I have always personally found compelling is His encounter with a widow in the village of Nain. Jesus did not know the woman, but He happened upon the funeral procession for her only son as He was passing through her village. Being left a widow with no children to care for her, her future was bleak indeed, which only intensified the grief of her loss. Jesus did a very unconventional thing: He stopped the procession, went up to the platform on which the man's body was being carried, and touched it and told the young man to arise. Touching the platform must have shocked those who witnessed it, because according to Jewish law, Jesus became "unclean" by doing so. But He was more concerned about the plight of the widow than the rules of the religious leaders. The Bible doesn't say, but my guess is that widow loved Jesus for the rest of her life.
- F. The strength of Jesus' personality is also evident from the fact that He had many loyal followers and friends. He summoned His apostles to "Come, follow me," and they were willing to leave everything behind (including their livelihoods) to do so. It's true that at times they grew weak and fled from Him – and one even denied Him – when they felt their lives were in danger. But even then they came back and eventually gave up their lives in order to tell others about Him.
- G. Remarkably, Jesus' personality still shines through to us, even though mediated by the words of the Bible. And even without seeing Him in person, people are still attracted by His personality.

2. His Teachings are attractive.

- A. While, as I noted previously, there was certainly an element of judgment in Jesus' teachings, His overall message was of the love of God and the possibility of redemption for anyone willing to receive it. And so He spoke a great deal about such things as love, forgiveness, and mercy.
- B. Even many who do not themselves follow Jesus acknowledge that His teachings in the Sermon on the Mount (found in Matthew chapters 5, 6, and 7) are among the greatest religious and ethical teachings ever given. In this remarkable message, Jesus speaks of a faith that is more than outward ritual and rules, but which touches the heart and changes us from within. He speaks of viewing people as God sees them rather than putting them down or taking vengeance on them for offending us. He speaks of putting God's kingdom first in our lives and of trusting God to provide all that we truly need in this life, and of not worrying about tomorrow but rather focusing all our attention on the only day we have, which is today.
- C. One of the most memorable aspects of Jesus' teachings is His parables. These very short stories and comparisons convey spiritual truths in a manner that is hard to forget once you have heard or read them.
- D. One of Jesus' most appealing parables is about a son who rejected his father. It is often called the "Parable of the Prodigal Son." It tells of the younger of two sons who rudely demanded his share of his father's estate, even while his father was still living. Once he had received it, he went away into "a far country," as far from his father as he could get, where he wasted everything he had by living in a foolish and immoral way. Finally, he ran out of money, and all of those who had been attracted to him when he had money abandoned him. He ended up feeding the pigs of a Gentile, a disgraceful condition for a young Jewish man. He was so hungry that he wanted to eat the pigs' food, but no one said he could do so. Finally, he "came to himself," Jesus said, and resolved to return to his father's house. Only now he would ask, not

to live there as a son, but simply to be given the role of a servant, because even his father's servants had plenty to eat. So he composed a little speech and rehearsed it: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants. But as he neared home, his father saw him while he was still a long way off. He had obviously been looking for him, longing for his return ever since he left. Rather than waiting for his son to come and bow before him and beg for mercy, the father ran to his son and hugged and kissed him. He instructed his servants to bring him a robe and shoes, and to give him a signet ring, which indicated his authority over all that his father had. And then he gave a great party to celebrate his son's return.

E. The obvious message of this parable is that God is like that father, that He longs for His wayward children to return to Him and rejoices when we do so. It is an assurance that the gates of heaven are never closed to those who seek God's forgiveness.

F. Who would not be attracted by teachings like that?

3. His Sacrifice is attractive.

A. Approximately 800 years before Jesus was born, one of Israel's prophets, Isaiah, foretold that He would be "despised and rejected among men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." And Jesus' life demonstrated the accuracy of that prediction. Even when He was born, the Jewish king wanted to kill Him, and although He had many followers, He had even more enemies. Eventually, as you probably know, He died by being crucified on a Roman cross.

B. Some of you may have seen the 2004 film, "The Passion of the Christ," produced by Mel Gibson. Many who saw it were repulsed by the violence it portrayed, especially of Jesus' crucifixion. This is because we simply don't understand what was involved in such an execution. It was regarded in the ancient world as not only the most painful, but also the most shameful, way to die. Yet, this is what happened to Jesus.

(1) Crucifixion, as practiced by the Romans, was always a public affair. The purpose was to terrorize the general populace into absolute submission to Roman authority. There was always a sign placed above the head of the one being executed, telling for what crime he was being put to death. In Jesus' case, the sign said simply, "The King of the Jews."

(2) The crucifixion itself was designed to produce maximum pain for as long as possible. According to the Gospels, Jesus died after about six hours on the cross, but the norm was three to seven days, since there was nothing about the act itself that would produce immediate death. Those who were crucified usually died from heart failure or heart rupture, a massive stroke, anaphylactic shock, or a secondary infection resulting from the wounds.

(3) People were sometimes crucified by being tied to the cross and left to die, but more often they were nailed there. The victim's feet were sometimes placed one on top of the other, with a long spike driven through the tops of both feet. In other cases the legs were turned sideways, with the spike driven through both heels.

(4) The victim's hands were not nailed through the palms, but at the wrist, so that the bones of the wrist could help support the weight of the dying person. Great care was taken

not to rupture any major blood vessels so as not to hasten death.

- (5) The legs of the one being crucified were bent slightly, so that he could breathe by pushing down on the feet. After a few hours on the cross, the diaphragm would become paralyzed, so it was necessary to be able to force air into the lungs by pushing down and forcing the air upward. This explains why, after Jesus died, the legs of the two criminals crucified with Him were broken, so they would suffocate and die before the beginning of the Jewish Passover celebration.
- (6) Since Jesus was already dead, one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, thrusting upward into the heart. The Gospel of John says that “blood and water” gushed out from the wound, probably indicating that Jesus died from a rupture of the heart, and that the clear serum and the red particles in the blood had already begun to separate and to collect in the pericardium, the sac which encases the heart.
- C. You’re probably wondering, “What is attractive about dying like that?” Yet Jesus Himself had foretold, “When I am lifted up from the earth (a euphemism for being crucified), I will draw all men to myself.” We have to wonder, how? Why?
- D. The answer lies in the meaning and purpose of Jesus’ death. The apostle Peter put it this way: “He himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed.”
- E. Paul wrote in his letter to the Christians at Rome, “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die – but God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by His blood, much more shall we be saved by Him from the wrath of God.”
- F. In other words, it isn’t simply the death of Jesus itself that so many millions have found so attractive, but the *reason* He died: for us, so that we might receive forgiveness of all our sins and enjoy eternity in the presence of God. Since we must all die, and since we are all sinners, it is no wonder that this message has had, and continues to have, such a universal appeal.

Of course, not everyone finds Jesus so attractive. In fact, in the earliest centuries following His life on earth, there were many harsh critics of Christianity, just as there are now, and many who found the idea of Jesus’ death on the cross for the sins of humanity a foolish concept, just as many do now. Fully realizing this, Paul wrote in his first Corinthian letter, “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. . . For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”

We live in an age when people think themselves much wiser than we really are. If we are so wise, why is there so much misery? If technology is truly the answer to all of our ills, why are there still so many problems plaguing mankind? Perhaps it is time to recognize that we cannot save ourselves. Perhaps it is time to once again consider the attractiveness of the One who said, “I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly.”

