

Why Jesus Lived

This winter, I played in a city basketball league. Our first three games were played at Holy Angels School in South Minneapolis. Overall, it was nice, but we found it hard to play there. The reason it was so hard is that we couldn't see the lines on the floor.

The main court, where the school team plays their games are fine, but the courts going sideways had lines the same color as the floor. So, we couldn't see the out of bounds, we couldn't see the three-point line (and I'm sure I jacked up a 30-footer or two). We couldn't even see the free-throw line. One of our guys lined up, but the officials had to confer to determine where the right line was. At least two times during the game, someone was called for dribbling out of bounds. It was really frustrating.

There are some who think games would be more fun if there were no boundaries or rules. *Oh, you shouldn't have to dribble. Don't be so strict about out of bounds. Just let us play.* I've done it before and it's *not* fun. In fact, it's totally pointless and frustrating.

We live in a society that doesn't like drawing lines. Lines are restrictive. And we'd rather be free to do what we want and go where we want. That's why words like doctrine and morality and "ought to" have fallen out of fashion today. We've replaced words like *religion* with the more palatable "spirituality," because religion is so stifling, and doctrine is restrictive while "spirituality" can mean anything. Even atheists can be "spiritual."

The fact is, we don't like people telling us what we should believe or how we should live. We don't like others telling us where to go—at least not until we're wandering in the desert dying of thirst. We don't like people drawing lines for us...until we're playing a game and have no idea where we are on court. You see, no lines or boundaries or direction doesn't make us free, it leaves us aimless and frustrated.

This isn't just true in basketball, it's also true in all of life. Sometimes I hear people say things like, "The God I believe in would never..." or "I'd like to think that God would..." But saying these things is like making up our own rules to a game. While it might seem freeing on the surface, in the end, it lacks purpose and becomes chaotic. It's great when it's working, but not very helpful when life falls apart.

Now, I know that sometimes religion and doctrine can seem stifling and telling someone you have the Truth about God has sometimes been used as a hammer to keep people in submission. But when it's done right, religion, doctrine, and the Truth about God, for those who are spiritually thirsty, it's like a drink of water for someone dying in the desert. This is especially true, when it comes to Jesus.

Easter is coming up in four weeks. And while Christ is at the center of Christianity all year round, these four weeks are the time when we focus on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The next four weeks, I'm not going to tell you how you should live or how you can be a better person. Instead, we are going spend the next four weeks

gazing into the face of Jesus. In the end, I hope that by looking at Jesus, you'll find the same purpose and meaning in life that billions of others have found.

But this Jesus is not the Jesus of our imagination. That Jesus is only a reflection of our own wants and wishes. Sometimes that Jesus only reflects our own wishes or what our current cultural moment believes to be true, but in a few years, when culture changes, so will that Jesus. Belief in the Jesus described in the Bible—rather than the Jesus we want to believe in—both challenges us and satisfies us at the same time. The Jesus we create in our minds is only a convenient way to justify what we want to believe.

So, as we look at Jesus, we want to do so on his terms. Today, we'll start by answering the question, "Why did Jesus live?" I'm going to answer the question three ways—to show us *who God is*, to show us *who we're created to be*, and to show us *what love looks like*. I believe that how we answer these three questions will determine our purpose in life. First, Jesus lived to show us who God is.

How do you get to know a God you can't see? Some people think the question is nonsense. If you can't see God, then why would we even believe such a God exists? Many people have tried to talk to God only for God to respond with deafening silence. And they assume the silence means there is no such God.

But many—maybe even most people—assume God exists. They look at the vastness of the universe and the precision of the laws of nature and agree with the

Psalmist in Psalm 19, **“¹The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. ²Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. ³They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. ⁴Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.”**

Others consider the intricacies of their body and don't believe it happened by chance—they see the work of a designer. And yet others think about our moral world and believe there has to be a law-giver. The Apostle Paul believes this shows us who God is when he writes in Romans, chapter 1, **“²⁰Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.”**

But while most people believe we can know *something* about God from nature, just what that God is like is a different story. For instance, in the ancient world, only Judaism and Zoroastrianism taught there was one God—the rest believed in multiple gods, with competing wills. Other religions didn't teach that the gods loved humanity—humans were at best useful and at worst a nuisance. Today, most eastern religions don't teach that God *cares* for humans because God isn't a conscious mind but an impersonal force.

The question is, how does Jesus show us who God is? Well, one of the foundational doctrines of Christianity is that Jesus was at the same time 100% God and 100% human. This isn't just some strange, inconsequential curiosity of ancient people trying to find

things to argue about. It was the way the early Christians made sense of what they experienced in the person of Jesus.

The book of John introduces Jesus by calling him “the *logos*” which had similar meanings in both Greek and Jewish philosophy. The *logos* was the guiding principle or law that holds everything together. It gives continuity to a world of chaos. Then in John 1:14, he writes, **“The *logos* became flesh and made his dwelling among us...”**

The writer of Hebrews says, **“³The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.”** (1:3) In Colossians, the Apostle Paul writes, **“¹⁵Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.”** (NLT) Even Jesus himself claimed this in John 14 in his conversation with Phillip, **“⁸Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” ⁹Jesus replied, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and yet you still don’t know who I am? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father! So, why are you asking me to show him to you?”**

Modern people today—at least people in the west—assume many things about God they don’t realize came directly from Jesus and his worldview—that there is only one God, that God is love, that God wants what’s best for them, that God sees them as his children, that God wants to forgive. We take these for granted, but that isn’t the case everywhere and hasn’t been the case in history. Now Jesus didn’t invent everything we think about God out of thin air. Jesus affirms the God of the Old Testament—that God is

one, that God is creator, that there will come a time when God will make everything right. But the way Jesus described God's character changed how people view God.

For instance, in Luke 15 where Jesus tells three parables about lost things—a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. Each parable is the story of someone who is obsessed with something lost. The shepherd leaves the 99 to find the one, a woman turns her house upside-down to find the coin, and a father who hikes up his robe in an undignified fashion to run out to greet his son who wished him dead. Each of these is a picture of God's attitude toward lost people.

But for Jesus, they weren't just parables. He was describing himself—God coming to earth to reclaim what is lost. This is precisely what he says in one of the most quoted verses in Scripture—John 3:16, **“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.”**

So many religions are about appeasing the gods so they'll look favorably on you. But Jesus shows us a God who doesn't need us to appease him, who is eager to forgive, but he reaches out to us and accepts anyone who repents and trusts Jesus and his way. Jesus lived to show us who God is.

So, Jesus is 100% God. But remember that Christianity teaches that Jesus was also 100% human. And this is critical because if Jesus is also human, he's the perfect human and he *lived to show us that to be human isn't just to fail.*

Now, maybe you've heard this before—when someone messes up, they make an excuse. They say, “Well, I’m only human.” What they mean is that they’re not perfect, they’re weak, or sometimes people use it to mean “sinful.” So, if to be human is to be sinful, then it would be weird to claim Jesus was human.

But this drives me crazy! because while that might be the popular idea of what it means to be human, the Biblical idea is very different. In the Bible, to be human is to be made in the image of God. It's to have incalculable worth and dignity and to have more potential than other created things.

Here's how Psalm 8 says it, **“³When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, ⁴what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? ⁵You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor. ⁶You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet...”**

Now, I know some of you hear this, but then look at your neighbor go, “*Wait!* This is describing *YOU*? I don't think so!” Or you're thinking about yourself, “this is describing *me*?” Or you look at Washington as saying, “This is describing *THEM*?” Well, yes! At our best, that's what we were created for. We're a cracked version of what we're created to be.

Now, we often feel the weight of our failure to be what we should be. So, we try to fix it by creating an ideal person and chasing that. For the ancient Greek philosophers,

the ideal was the philosopher and virtuous man. In the Renaissance, it was the poet and the artist who could capture the true beauty of humanity. During the Enlightenment, it was the one who improved the world through pure reason and scientific discovery. For the Nazis it was the Aryan race. At the same time, in America, it was the dutiful citizen. In the 80's it was the successful businessman and the riches that went with it. Today, the ideal is the one who expresses herself free from the stifling expectations of society.

Now, part of this quest for greatness is God-given. I believe we do have a longing to fly—kind of like a kite in the wind seems to want to soar higher and higher. But what happens when we untether the kite from the pilot (yes, someone flying a kite is called a pilot) when the kite is untethered from the pilot, it'll soon come crashing to the ground.

Christianity has always taught there's a different answer to our failure to live up to our status as image-bearers. Christianity teaches that to look at Jesus is to see what we were intended to be. Allowing Jesus to be the pilot doesn't limit us, he lets us soar.

Now, what does that mean to be *like* Jesus? Does that mean that the ideal human is Jewish? No. A man? No. Does that mean we should wear tunics and sandals and walk around the countryside preaching? More likely, but still NO! Does it mean we should be able to go out and walk on Silver Lake? I wish. It would make baptisms really cool! But no.

To understand how we should be like Jesus, let's talk about what keeps us from being like Jesus—sin. If you asked many Christians the definition of sin, they would

probably give you a legal definition we learned from Sunday school. “Sin is the willful transgression of a known law of God.” You can certainly find places like that in the Bible. But the New Testament word for sin simply means to “miss the mark” like an arrow misses a bullseye. So, what is the mark? And how do we miss it?

Look deeper in the Bible and you’ll find that, at its heart, *sin is relational*. Adam and Eve were created to be in right relationship with God, each other and the world. So, when they sinned, they damaged all three relationships. They hid from God, they blamed each other and all creation was subjected to the effects of sin. So, when we talk about how we fall short of God’s best, the answer is our inability to love.

That’s why the third reason Jesus lived was to show us what true greatness is. I was talking to someone the other day who told me about some friends from high school and college who have already gone on to do some impressive things. One is a writer for well-known advocacy group and got to sit in a box at their awards ceremony with a couple of celebrities. I don’t know if that’s an accomplishment, but it’s pretty cool. Another friend has advanced quickly in her career. Another is the student body president of the U.

And the person was kind of lamenting the fact that she hadn’t accomplished that much in life. But as we talked, we came to realize that so many of the things that we consider great—like making money, or being in powerful positions, rubbing elbows with celebrities, or traveling the world, don’t make you great.

Now, sometimes we say things like that to console people because they didn't reach their goals. But Jesus' definition of great literally had *nothing* to do with any of those things the world considers great. Instead, here was Jesus definition of greatness, **“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— ²⁸just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”**

You see what he's doing? He's defining greatness by a person's ability to love. But it's not just a sentimental kind of love we write songs about or some general idea of being nice to people—as good as those are. Jesus is talking about is self-sacrificial love.

In Jesus' day greatness was pretty much reserved for the upper-class, the people born in a place of privilege, or with money or royal blood. There was never a realistic shot at being anything more than what you were.

In our day, while people sometimes go from rags to riches or from humble beginnings to greatness, it's still rare and you still need to be blessed with a rare ability—athletic, intellectual, or artistic and of course, it helps to be born into the right situation.

But when Jesus showed us that God's measure of greatness is in our ability to love, we learned that it's available to anyone. The rich can do it and the poor can do it. People

of every race and creed can do it. Able-bodied to people with every type of disability, young and young. Greatness is possible for anyone and the only requirement is humility.

This is also what ties God and humanity together. In fact, there's a passage in the New Testament where Jesus tells us to be not just great, but "perfect!" Here's the passage, "⁴³ **You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'** ⁴⁴**But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,** ⁴⁵**that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.** ⁴⁶**If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?** ⁴⁷**And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?** ⁴⁸**Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."**

On June 2nd, 2010, 28 year-old Armando Galarraga was pitching for the Detroit Tigers against the Cleveland Indians. Over the course of his career, Galarraga was a mediocre pitcher. He wasn't going to make it to the hall of fame. His record at that point was 51 wins, 58 losses. But for a pitcher there's one thing that would change that in one night—pitch a perfect game.

A perfect game is when the pitcher doesn't allow any base-runners—no hits, no walks, no errors. To show you how rare they are, to that point in baseball history—over

200,000 games played over more than 100 years, there had been 20. Pitch a perfect game and you get mentioned in the hall of fame.

This night, Galarraga was perfect through 8 2/3 innings. He needed only one out to complete the perfect game. Rookie Jason Donald hit a ground ball to the first baseman who threw the ball to Galarraga who was covering first base. It landed in his glove a fraction of a second—but clearly before Donald’s foot hit first base. It should have been a routine call for a veteran ump. Instead, Jim Joyce inexplicably called him safe.

After the game, Joyce walked into the umpire’s dressing room and asked the crew to cue up the video. After he watched it one time he knew he blew the call. So he invited the media in and repeatedly acknowledged that he blew the call. One reporter felt bad for him and tried to console him by saying, “it’s just a call” He said, *“This isn’t just a call. This is a history call. It was the most important call of my life and I missed it.”*

When the media left, Joyce invited Galarraga in to the dressing room. When he came in, Joyce was so torn up, he couldn’t speak. When he finally, composed himself, he looked at Galarraga and mustered up the word, “Lociento”—I’m sorry. “You were perfect, kid, I was not.”

But even more stunning was Galarraga’s response. When they asked him about the blown call, he said, “Nobody’s perfect.” The story in Sport Illustrated a week after that game had the perfect title, “A Different Kind of Perfect.”

Some people might say things would be better if Joyce had just gotten the call right. But I'm not so sure. You see, in the overall scheme of life, is it better that Joyce got the call right or that we get to see forgiveness on a large scale? I think maybe the latter. Galarraga was right, nobody is perfect. And this is the key, his willingness to live with understanding—to sacrifice his right to retaliate—completely changed the story.

No one would have blamed him if he had become bitter. But if he did, the attention of the sports world would have been overwhelmingly negative and there would be a cloud of anger and disappointment over baseball. But with a shrug, he changed all that.

Now, of course, God is perfect in every way. But he only asks us to be perfect in one. And when we are, we are like him. But he didn't just tell us—Jesus, through the life he lived, showed us. He didn't just give us a philosophy to live by. He didn't just inspire us through eloquent words or impress us with miracles. He didn't achieve riches, worldly power or success in the way the world defines success. He only had a handful of followers when was done. But he showed us what God is like, what we're supposed to be, and what true greatness is through the same life.

So, what's the takeaway? Well, it's simple...what are you trying to be? What is the life you're chasing? What does greatness mean to you? If you're building on any other foundation, I hope you reevaluate. I want you to take the time right now and do that. Is self-sacrificial love your definition of greatness?