

## In the Footsteps of Jesus

By Michael A. Schuler

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### Gleanings from Ancient and Modern Sources

#### From Luke 12:16-31

**A**nd Jesus told them a parable, saying “The land of a rich man brought forth plentifully; and the man thought to himself, What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?” And he said, I will do this; I will pull down my barns, and build larger ones; and there I will store all my grains and my goods. And then I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry”

But God said to him, “Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich towards God.

And Jesus said to his disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat, nor about your body, what you shall put on. For life is more than food, and the body is more than what you put on.

“Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And which of you by being anxious can add a cubit to his span of life? If then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest?

“Consider the lilies, how they grow; they neither toil or spin: yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass which is alive in the field today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O men of little faith!

“And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be of anxious mind. For all the nations of the world seek these things; and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things shall be yours as well.”

#### From *Report to Greco* by Nikos Kazantzakis

In the third grade [our teacher was] Periander Krasakis.... He drove us to distraction for hours on end—which vowels were long, which were short, whether to use an acute or circumflex accent—while we listened to the voices in the street—vegetable mongers, koulouri boys, donkeys braying, women laughing—and waited for the bell to ring so that we could escape.

We watched the teacher sweating away at his desk as he repeated the points of grammar over and over again in an effort to make them stick in our minds. But our thoughts were outside in the sun, on pebble warfare. We adored this game and often came to school with broken heads.

One divine spring day, the windows were open. A tangerine tree was in bloom across the street and its perfume entered the classroom. Each of our minds had turned into a blossoming tangerine tree; we could not bear to hear anything more about acute and circumflex accents.

A bird came just then, perched on the plain tree in the schoolyard and began to sing. At that point a pale redheaded student who had arrived that year from his village, Nikolois by name, was unable to control himself. He raised his finger.

“Be quite sir,” he cried. “Be quiet and let us hear the bird.”

### Reflections

**W**ho was Jesus, really? Was he, as Christian orthodoxy claims, the utterly unique incarnation of the Almighty, sent to deliver humankind from sin and death by miraculous means? Or was he a prophet, a man who was not himself God, but who spoke authoritatively for God—someone who was privy to God’s will and his intentions? Or was he fundamentally a teacher, a figure whose personal magnetism and profound insights attracted a large following and created an enduring legacy?

Would it diminish Jesus to revere him “only” as a magnificent teacher; to remove the mantel of Savior or Messiah and place him instead among the pantheon of great wisdom-seekers and truth-tellers. Surely, Jesus belongs in the same category as Socrates, Buddha, Lao Tse and Rumi—individuals whose perceptiveness also impressed multitudes. Exceptional teachers are incredibly rare, and what they offer is incredibly precious.

Unfortunately, in today’s materialistic, money driven world teachers are not only under-compensated and undervalued, they are often denigrated. We’ve all heard the old put-down, “those who can’t do, teach.” According to conventional wisdom, you won’t find truly talented people in the classroom. The real geniuses are out developing new products and earning big bucks. Teaching is for losers—so

why would we want to think of Jesus that way?

Well, first of all because that's how his followers regarded him. Although they sometimes speculated that this charismatic man might be something *more* than a teacher, he was, first and foremost, their "rabbi." And Jesus spent the better part of his time teaching, although like many holy men of that era, he was also a healer.

The argument that he most likely *was* a notable teacher and not a celestial savior is reinforced by the work of Biblical scholars like Bart Ehrman, author of a new book entitled *Misquoting Jesus*.

Ehrman, a former Christian fundamentalist, is now a respected specialist in the literature of the New Testament, and he points out that almost every passage in the Gospels that refers to Jesus as "God" was not there originally. It seems that some of the early scribes and theologians who copied the words of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John took certain liberties. More specifically, they inserted Trinitarian language into the text.

These changes in the original manuscripts were quite deliberate, Ehrman maintains. They were made to embellish Jesus's reputation and to elevate his stature—to transform him from a gifted teacher

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Bart Ehrman isn't some kind of wild-eyed liberal academic. Most reputable Biblical scholars now concede that Jesus was probably not regarded by his closest contemporaries as literally *the* Son of God. He was an amazing man, and that is probably because he was an amazing teacher.

In what sense, then, is that true? What made Jesus so outstanding that, after his death, people began building a cult around him? Not that this isn't normal behavior for human beings. Later generations spun legends about Lao Tse and Buddha as well, attributing to them miraculous births and the power to perform super-human feats. This merely confirms that gifted teachers often strike others as preternaturally inspired and in a category all by themselves.

Jesus was exceptional both for the content of his

message *and* the way he packaged and delivered it. In the first place, he employed concrete examples, metaphors, and characters that his illiterate listeners could easily relate to. But then he created from this stock of everyday material a collection of teaching tools—parables and aphorisms—that were strikingly original. They were pointed, sometimes meant to be humorous, and generally quite subversive.

Jesus's reputation spread precisely *because* he was so inventive. As James Breech notes, in the ancient world wisdom was often conveyed through stories, and the same stories were passed along, repeated, and became rather conventional. But many of Jesus's parables are uniquely his own, without precedent. He did not seem to be working from a borrowed script, not parroting stories he'd previously heard. Like Shakespeare, this man's ability to tell a meaningful tale was truly inspired.

Second, Jesus drew from first-hand experience. The Kingdom of God was not, for him, an abstract concept or something speculative. The people he addressed were convinced that he had himself *experienced* the Kingdom and was therefore able to point others in the right direction. Steven Davies believes that Jesus was a shaman, a spirit-possessed healer who could "induce a religious trance and make the Kingdom of God palpable." Or, like the Buddha, personal enlightenment was the cornerstone of his wisdom.

Direct exposure to that whereof they speak is one of the hallmarks of a master teacher. Scribes and rabbis of Jesus's time typically taught from a text; their wisdom and their authority was based almost entirely on what they had received second, third, or fourth hand. It was scholarly teaching, but it tended to be impersonal, legalistic, and tradition-bound. Rabbis taught the law in the same way Periander Krasakis taught grammar. They tried to drum it into people's heads while all the while the listener yearned for connection with something *real*, something immediate and beautiful, like a tangerine tree or a warbling bird. Jesus taught what was real.

"For our words to have *energy*," Thich Nhat Hanh says, "they must come from more than ideas, theories, or even scripture. We can only teach what we have experienced ourselves."

Now when it came to Scripture, Jesus was certainly no slouch. He could quote chapter and verse with the best of them and often invoked the authoritative words of Moses and the Prophets. But their reputation did not deter him from offering new interpretations of the ancient Law, based on his

own, personal experience of the Kingdom. Thus, in Matthew's Gospel Jesus repeatedly challenges conventional scriptural wisdom:

You have heard it said that "you shall not kill," but I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment.... And you have heard it said, "Do not swear falsely," but I say to you, do not swear at all ... simply say 'yes' or 'no' for anything more than this comes from evil.... You have heard it said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," but I say do not resist one who is evil, but if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.... You have heard it said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy," but I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...."

The Gospel of Mark provides yet another example of Jesus's independence. Defying the cardinal rule against picking grain and performing healings on the Sabbath Jesus says, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."

"Jesus always spoke from the heart," Stephen Mitchell writes, "He didn't believe, he *knew*." He revered Scripture and commended it to his listeners. But he refused to adhere to it slavishly when common sense or simple compassion argued otherwise.

Mitchell believes that, like the Buddha, Jesus possessed a special aura—he projected a "lightness and a joy"—that people found utterly convincing. He was, as we say, the "real deal"—a larger than life figure whose opinions were as weighty as those of Moses. As much as his singular stories, his *presence*, and his confidence impressed those who gathered to hear him.

But in addition to the medium, there *was* the message itself, a body of teaching that was distinctly at odds with the prevailing culture, its conventions, and its morality. It was a powerful pedagogy, and it was subversive.

For instance, although Jesus occasionally appears to endorse violence—"Do you think that I have come to bring peace on earth? I bring not peace, but a sword," is a good example—the general thrust and theme of his teaching is unconditional, unqualified love. In fact, the passage from Matthew just cited is so atypical that many scholars seriously doubt its authenticity.

The healing, reconciling, and unifying ethic that pervades the Gospels may not strike the modern reader as radical or subversive, perhaps because

they've been repeated so often. But consider these words of Walter Wink:

There are six hundred pages of explicit violence in the Hebrew Bible, one thousand verses where God's own violent actions of punishment are described, a hundred passages where Yahweh expressly commands others to kill people.... In fact, violence is easily the most mentioned activity in the Hebrew Bible.

What must it have been like to be a "peacenik" in the ancient Middle East and to promote peaceful relations in a tradition that worshipped a Deity with a pretty pronounced mean streak? Even some of his closest associates found it hard to accept that Jesus was sincere on this issue.

At the garden of Gethsemane, on the night of his arrest, Peter tried to defend Jesus with his knife, cutting off a man's ear in the process. Jesus admonished him saying, "those who live by the sword will surely perish by the sword." Can any teaching be clearer than that? Like most of Jesus's more subversive teachings, his rejection of violence is, of course, generally disregarded.

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The subject of money and riches receives similar treatment. While Jesus generally has gentle words for Samaritans, lepers, and harlots—for the *hoi polloi* in general—he is consistently critical of the wealthy. The experience of the Kingdom is pretty much unavailable to the rich, he suggests, not because they *are* rich, but because the pursuit of wealth commands so much of their attention, compromises their morality, and undercuts their compassion.

Jesus is a very accepting fellow, and the Gospels report that a few of his followers were men of means. But this never stopped him from speaking out against those who were too acquisitive. "Fool!" he tells the rich farmer, "... to lay up treasure for yourself and ignore matters of the spirit."

Like Gandhi, Jesus sought to align himself with the poorest of the poor. "The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head," he said—not self-pityingly, but as simply a matter of fact. In this respect, he again sought to distinguish himself from traditional wisdom teachers who toed the line, taught what powerful people wanted to hear, and were well paid for their compliance. Like Socrates, Jesus wouldn't sell his soul to anyone. "All I do,"

Socrates told his critics,

... is go about trying to persuade you not to care about your ... monies first, but to care most exceedingly for the soul, and to make it as good as possible.

Jesus couldn't have said it any better, and *did* say much the same thing throughout the Gospels. This did not, of course, endear him to the powerful interests in ancient Palestine—the folks who control the assets and pull all the strings. As Walter Wink reminds us, it wasn't the pagan or irreligious folk who ultimately did this outspoken, incorruptible teacher in: it was the most pious and orthodox. It wasn't the criminal element, but the most respectable segment of Society. It wasn't the anarchists, but those who thought that by getting rid of Jesus, they were upholding the established order.

Jesus was certainly aware that his approach to teaching was well out of the mainstream. It still is. Our own culture, as Marcus Borg notes, is all about "The Three A's"—Achievement, Affluence, and Appearance. Go to the self-help or business sections at any major bookstore, and you will find hundreds of publications by incredibly successful, handsomely compensated, and utterly conventional consultants that address the "Three A's." This is what our culture pays attention to; this is what it rewards. This is the conventional wisdom.

It is also the "broad way," but what Jesus had personally experienced, what he described and what he advocated, was a "narrow way"—compassionate, creative, non-hierarchical, communal, non-competitive, and non-anxious.

Today, a good many professing Christians blithely ignore Jesus's repeated rebukes of the money-makers and the money-changers. They participate in a ruthless economic system that has created enormous disparities of wealth and kept billions mired in misery, yet they claim to be followers of Jesus. "Today's Christian revival," Marilyn Robinson writes,

... has given something very like unlimited moral authority to money, even though Jesus said, "Woe to you who are rich." If his statement sounds dangerous and un-American, then those who make such criticisms should at least have the candor to acknowledge that their quarrel is really with Jesus.

So why does this putatively "Christian" culture of ours dismiss these crystal clear teachings so casually? In part, because we find them economically and politically problematic. Like the rich young man who wanted to enter the Kingdom, but could not bring himself to sell his estate and give the proceeds to the poor, surrendering our affluence is almost inconceivable. Materialism still trumps spirituality almost every time.

But there is also a theological factor. Once Jesus was transformed into a supernatural savior with the power to redeem *anyone* for all eternity—rich or poor, cruel or kind, literally anyone who invokes his name—the ethical and spiritual teachings became largely incidental. All that mattered now was a confession of faith and the influx of divine grace. Jesus's humble life and his quirky career were swallowed up by the great drama of the crucifixion and resurrection. Teaching was just a temporary gig leading up to the main event.

I have no real quarrel with those who believe in the Easter miracle and find therein a measure of hope and consolation. This remains, for most Christians, the essence of their religion—the central, saving message. But in embracing the savior, why discount the teacher? If the path he walked seems too difficult, and the gate he described appears too narrow, we at least owe it to ourselves on this day devoted to Jesus' memory, to ask ourselves why.

### Closing Words

#### From Clinton Lee Scott (adapted)

Jesus is risen from the dead.  
The centuries have not been able to bury him.  
Forsaken by his friends,  
Sentenced to die with thieves,  
His mangled body buried in a borrowed tomb,  
He has risen ... to haunt our hate-filled world  
With the restlessness of his undying hopes....  
The imperial forces that tried to destroy him  
Have long ago destroyed themselves.  
Those who passed judgment upon him  
Are remembered only because of him....  
Meanwhile, the majesty of this carpenter-teacher  
Bearing his cross up the hill  
Still remains to rebuke the ways of hypocrisy,  
callousness  
And violence.