

Was Jesus nice?

Followers of Jesus Christ claim not only to believe in him but to follow him and to model their lives on his. As he told his disciples, “A disciple is not above his teacher, but every one when he is fully taught will be like his teacher.” (Lk. 6:40 RSV) So mature Christians — those who are “fully taught” — should be like Jesus Christ. This means, among other things, that the way Jesus interacted with people when he walked the earth is the way we should interact with people today.

But if Christlikeness is a goal of Christians, we must know what kind of a person Jesus was — how he interacted with others — when he was on earth. Our only objective source of information about what Jesus did and said is in the New Testament, mostly in the four Gospels. Yet these relatively few printed pages have led Christians to model many very different kinds of Jesus, everything from a passive dreamer to an active revolutionary.

The model that often predominates among evangelical Christians is the nice Jesus. He is always smiling, always looking on the bright side, always putting a positive spin on negative developments ... or just ignoring them. This Jesus does not criticize or disagree. His highest value seems to be harmony, getting along, having nice words and loving feelings for everyone.

A side effect of embracing this model of Jesus is avoidance of controversy. This means, for example, not even discussing — let alone preaching on — subjects like abortion, homosexuality, immigration, divorce, and other issues on which many Christians are divided. Even relatively safe subjects like war and peace, or poverty, are glossed over if touched on at all. Instead we mostly focus on “spiritual” issues.

So let’s look at the Scriptures to see if Jesus really was “nice.” I spent over two years studying the way Jesus interacted with individuals and small groups of people in the Gospels,

and I found a very different Jesus from the one modeled in many Christian circles.

I have organized my conclusions into five categories: How Jesus encountered ...

- Needy, hurting people.
- Disciples and other followers.
- Hosts and guests at social events.
- Religious leaders.
- Civil authorities

How Jesus encountered needy, hurting people

What was Jesus' approach to hurting, suffering, downtrodden people, especially those who were marginalized and generally overlooked by others? People with various kinds of needs, physical and spiritual, often came to Jesus, and sometimes he reached out to them.

Here's how he acted toward these people:

- In addition to healing a man born blind, Jesus looked for him after he had been thrown out of the synagogue and led him to faith in himself. (Jn. 9:1-38)
- He spotted a woman with a severe curvature of the spine in the synagogue and interrupted his teaching to help her. (Lk. 13:10-17)
- He was "moved with pity" and healed a leper who asked to be healed. (Mt. 8:2-4; Mk. 1:40-44; Lk. 5:12-14)
- After a woman caught in the act of adultery was hauled before Jesus while he was teaching, he stooped to write in the dust in order to shield her from staring eyes, and he spoke tenderly to her after dispersing the crowd. (Jn. 8:2-11)
- When a hemorrhaging woman interrupted him on a journey, he spoke encouraging words to her, commending her faith and telling her to "Go in peace." (Mt. 9:20-22; Mk. 5:25-34; Lk. 8:43-48)
- His greeting to the paralytic who was lowered through the roof into a crowded room where Jesus was teaching was "My son." According to Mt. he said, "Take heart, my son." (Mt. 9:1-8; Mk. 2:1-12; Lk. 5:17-26)

Rich people can be needy too, and when they came to Jesus not to display their power but to seek his help, he was very kind to them. For example, when the rich young ruler came to him asking how to get eternal life, and said he had kept the Commandments since his youth, Jesus “looked at him and loved him.” (Mk. 10:21)

Jesus expressed his love to hurting individuals not only in words but in actions, the kind of actions that most of us would never think of doing. Though he could, and sometimes did, heal by spoken word alone, he often physically touched sick or disabled strangers, sometimes in ways that to us seem embarrassingly personal:

- He took a blind man by the hand to lead him out of the village, instead of just walking by his side. (Mk. 8:22-26)
- He put his hands on a woman with a severe curvature of the spine when he was teaching in the synagogue. (Lk. 13:10-17)
- He touched a leper who came to him for healing. (Mt. 8:2-4; Mk. 1:40-44; Lk. 5:12-14)
- He spit on the ground, made mud, and smeared it on the eyes of a man who had been born blind. (Jn. 9:1-38)
- Another time he spit on his hands, and twice touched a blind man’s eyes. (Mk. 8:22-26)
- He inserted his fingers into a deaf mute’s ears and touched his tongue with his own spittle. (Mk. 7:31-37)
- While he was reclining at a meal in a Pharisee’s house, he allowed a woman who was probably a prostitute to pour perfume on him, and even, according to Luke, to wet his feet with her tears, wipe them with her hair, and kiss them. (Mt. 26:6-13; Mk. 14:3-9; Lk. 7:36-50)

Finally, the world has often looked down upon four categories of people: women, children, foreigners, and those with loathsome diseases. Jesus was especially welcoming to all of them.

As to women, Luke says Jesus allowed some of them to travel with his disciples, and these women even helped to supply the disciples' financial needs out of their own pockets. (Lk. 8:1-3). He deliberately injected women into conversations that ostensibly had nothing to do with women. (Mt. 12:50: "For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother *and sister* and mother") In the most extended encounter of Jesus with a woman, he initiated the conversation by asking her for a drink of water, then he spent time discussing theology with her, and finally led her to personal faith in himself. (Jn. 4:4-42)

Children usually "don't count," but they counted with Jesus. When his disciples rebuked people who were bringing children to Jesus for his blessing, he turned around and rebuked the disciples (Mark says he was "indignant" with them), saying "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them,, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." (Mt. 19:13-15; Mk. 10:13-16; Lk. 18:15-17) On another occasion, Jesus picked up a little child (or put him by his side) and used him as an object lesson for how to receive Christ. (Mt. 18:2-5; Mk. 9:36-37; Lk. 9:47-48)

Jesus also embraced Samaritans, foreigners who were generally shunned by his fellow Jews. He went out of his way to praise Samaritans; for example, by telling a memorable parable starring a compassionate and generous Samaritan. (Lk.10:30-37) He didn't mind traveling in Samaria, and in fact spent two days in a Samaritan village, at the invitation of the inhabitants, winning many Samaritans to faith in him. (Jn. 4:4, 40)

Finally, as pointed out above, Jesus was quite unshameful about touching lepers as well as others he healed. (See (Mt. 8:2-4; Mk. 1:40-44; Lk. 5:12-14) He was a guest in the home of a leper. (Mt. 26:6; Mk. 14:3) See also Lk. 17:11-17, where Jesus healed a man who was both a Samaritan and a leper.

Other examples could be given to show how Jesus interacted with people, mostly strangers, who were needy, hurting, or downtrodden in some way. Almost invariably¹ he was kind, thoughtful, and tender; i.e., “nice.”

How Jesus encountered his disciples and other followers

Many Christians seem to have no idea of how sharply Jesus sometimes spoke to his closest friends, his band of disciples. For example, one time he told them right to their faces that they were “evil.” (Mt. 7:11; Lk. 11:13).

The leader of the band of disciples, Peter, who might be expected to enjoy the closest fellowship with Jesus, often experienced Jesus’ sharp tongue. After Jesus predicted Peter’s death by crucifixion, Peter asked him what was going to happen to John the beloved disciple. Jesus cut him short by saying, in effect, that it was none of his business. (Jn. 21:15-23) Actually, this was tame compared with what Jesus said when Peter took him aside to remonstrate with him about his prediction that he was going to Jerusalem to be killed. Jesus turned and said to him, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.” (Mt. 16:23)

Peter probably did not think Jesus was being very nice to him. The other disciples may have felt the same way when they criticized a woman who intruded on a dinner party to pour costly perfume on his head and feet. Jesus said nothing that we know of to the woman, but he turned to his disciples, praised what the woman had done, and said, “Leave her alone!”

¹ The only example I could find of Jesus apparently not being nice to someone seeking his help was when he rebuffed the Canaanite woman who came to him pleading for healing for her demon-possessed daughter. At first Jesus didn’t even answer her, and then he told her, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.” (Mt. 15:21-28; Mk. 7:24-30) Although he did heal her daughter when he recognized the woman’s faith, his interaction with her certainly does not sound nice.

(Mk. 14:6; Jn. 12:7; see also Mt. 26:10, “Why do you trouble the woman?”) Here Jesus was showing kindness to the woman while speaking sharply or at least firmly to his disciples.

Sometimes Jesus simply ignored his disciples, and refused to even respond to what seemed like relevant comments. For example, one day Jesus suddenly turned around in the midst of a crowd and demanded, “Who touched me?” “You see the people crowding against you,” his disciples answered, “and yet you can ask, ‘Who touched me?’” Jesus didn’t even bother to answer them; he just kept looking around to see who had touched him. (Mk. 5:30-32; cf. Lk 8:45-46, where Jesus did respond to Peter)

Jesus often criticized his disciples for their fear and lack of faith, even in situations when most people would be afraid. When a furious storm came upon the disciples while they were crossing the Sea of Galilee, so that the waves were sloshing over the side of the boat, they cried out for Jesus to save them. His first words to them were not words of comfort and cheer. He turned to them and said, “You of little faith, why are you so afraid?” (Mt. 8:26) According to Mark, he said, “Do you still have no faith?” (Mk. 4:40) And Luke quotes him as saying, “Where is your faith?” (Lk. 8:25)

In fact, one of his favorite nicknames for his disciples was “you of little faith.” (see Mt. 6:30, 16:8; Lk. 12:27) That is what he called Peter when Peter tried to walk on water. (Mt. 14:31) He did not hesitate to rebuke them for “their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe.” (Mk. 16:14)

Jesus was apparently insensitive to a prospective disciple who said to him, “Lord first let me go and bury my father.” Jesus’ sharply replied, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.” Mt. 8:21-22)

That Jesus was not always smiling and approachable is shown by the fact that some-

times his disciples, rather than asking him a question, discussed among themselves the meaning of what he had said or done. For example, after Jesus had calmed the storm on the Sea of Galilee, “They were terrified and asked each other, ‘Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!’” (Mk. 4:41)

There are exceptions to this pattern, however. At times Jesus was very tender and patient with his followers. For example, when two disciples (or their mother) asked him for places of glory in heaven, Jesus didn’t rebuke or criticize them, but patiently explained why he could not grant their request. (Mt. 20:20-28; Mk. 10:35-45) He was also gentle with Martha when she complained to him about having to do all the work of hospitality while her sister Mary just sat and listened to Jesus. “Martha, Martha,” he said, “You are worried and upset about many things” (Lk. 10:38-42) But note that he didn’t try to placate her by saying anything to Mary, or even by suggesting that Martha had a valid complaint.

And he certainly looked out for his disciples’ needs. At least twice he guided his disciples to a huge catch of fish after they had been out all night without catching anything. (Lk. 5:1-11; Jn. 21:1-14) On one of those occasions, he got up early and met the disciples’ incoming boat on the beach, where he had prepared a hot breakfast for them and proceeded to serve it to them. (Jn. 21:1-14)

Based on the New Testament, my conclusion is that Jesus was not consistently “nice” when dealing with those closest to him. Sometimes he was kind and patient toward them, but more often he seemed to place a much higher priority on plainly speaking the truth to them. Usually with his disciples he was straightforward, demanding, sometimes even impatient. He didn’t curry favor, he didn’t sugar-coat negatives; he didn’t try to avoid hurting their feelings. In other words, Jesus often was not “nice” toward his followers.

How Jesus encountered hosts and guests at social events

Jesus was very popular, even with many of those who opposed him. He was frequently invited to dinners, weddings, and other social events, and he seems to have accepted the invitations no matter who they came from. He didn't just hang out with his Christian friends.

So how did Jesus act at these events? Was he the perfect guest with impeccable manners, complimenting the host, charming the other guests, and fitting right in? Not even close.

This to me is one of the most surprising things about how Jesus interacted with people. I expected his tenderness and compassion toward the needy, and I can understand his firm, no-nonsense, tough-love approach to his followers. But surely he would be nice to those who were honoring him with a banquet!

That's not what we find in the Scriptures. Instead, we find Jesus lecturing the hosts, criticizing the guests, asking embarrassing questions, and generally being provocative to the point of rudeness.

One time, for example, he was invited to dine at the home of a prominent Pharisee on a Sabbath day. A man suffering from dropsy (edema) suddenly appeared before him, which created a problem. Jesus had a reputation as a healer, but he knew that healing on the Sabbath was generally considered to be a form of work prohibited on the Sabbath. So what did he do? He could have told the man to see him later, or taken him aside to heal him privately.

Instead Jesus looked away from the man and spoke directly to the host and the guests, who were Pharisees and scribes (experts in the Old Testament law): "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?" he asked them, putting them on the spot. When they refused to answer, he took the man, healed him, and sent him away. (Lk. 14:1-4)

But Jesus wasn't finished. He then asked those present what they would do if their son

or ox fell into a well on a Sabbath – wouldn't they immediately pull the boy or animal out of the well? Again they were silent. (Lk. 14:5-6)

We could speculate that at least some of them might have been thinking, "OK, Jesus, you've made your point. Now let's get on with the dinner." Whether they were or not, Jesus had more to say. Noticing how the guests were maneuvering to get the best seats, the places of honor near the head table, he told them a little story about why they should choose the lowest, not the highest place. "Choose too high," he said, "and you're likely to be embarrassed by the host asking you to move down when a more distinguished guest shows up. But if you choose a lower seat, the host may come and ask you to move up, honoring you in the presence of all." (Lk. 14:7-11, paraphrased)

Finally Jesus, who was quickly becoming *persona non grata*, turned once more to the Pharisee who had invited him to the meal and criticized his guest list. He said to his host that when he gave a banquet, he should not invite his relatives, friends, and rich neighbors, who would repay the invitation, but rather he should invite the poor and crippled, who would not be able to repay him. That way he would be repaid at "the resurrection of the righteous." (Lk. 14:12-14)

Another time when Jesus was invited to dinner at the home of a Pharisee, he omitted, apparently deliberately, the customary hand-washing before sitting down to the meal. When his host noticed it and was surprised, Jesus said, "Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You foolish people! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? But give what is inside the dish to the poor, and everything will be clean for you." And this wasn't all he said. He went on to criticize the Pharisees for meticulously tithing their garden herbs, but neglecting justice and the

love of God, and for loving the most important seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces. He said they were like “unmarked graves, which men walk over without knowing it.” (Lk. 11:37-44)

Meanwhile all the guests at the dinner were listening. One of them, an expert in the Old Testament law, stood up and said, “Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also.” Did Jesus turn to him and apologize? No, Jesus then criticized these experts, saying “You load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.” He also accused them of taking away “the key to knowledge.” He said, “You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering.” (Lk. 11:45-52)

It seems safe to say that no one at either of these dinners came away thinking, “Boy, that Jesus sure is a nice person.”

Of course, these events were hosted and attended, for the most part, by those who were opposed to Jesus, or at least skeptical about him. Probably the best-known social event Jesus attended was the wedding at Cana in Galilee, where he, his mother, Mary, and his disciples were all guests, but no communication between Jesus and either the host or the other guests (except for his mother) is reported in Scripture. (Jn. 2:1-11) Jesus did take control of the crisis that erupted when they ran out of wine, and told the servants what to do, but nothing that I can see in this account points to Jesus being particularly nice or not nice.

Luke has a singular account of a dinner party hosted by a Pharisee named Simon. Jesus was personally invited to the meal by Simon, so he went into his home and reclined at the table. Suddenly an uninvited woman appeared and went to where Jesus was reclining. She began to weep and shed tears on Jesus’ feet; she wiped them with her hair, and then poured ex-

pensive perfume on them. Simon was understandably horrified, but when Jesus didn't push the woman away or reject her slobbering attention, Simon said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is – that she is a sinner."

So far the scene, although bizarre, was peaceful. The other guests either didn't notice what was going on or they chose, out of politeness or embarrassment, to ignore it. Jesus knew what his host was thinking, and he could have ignored it, or spoken separately to him about it. But that's not how Jesus acted at social affairs. Instead, he got everybody's attention by telling Simon a little story followed by a devastating question.

"Simon," he said, "I have something to tell you." Simon said, "Tell me, teacher," (What else could he say? Jesus was putting him on the spot.) Jesus said a man was owed a large sum of money by one debtor and a relatively trivial amount by another, and he forgave both their debts. "Which of them will love him more?" Jesus asked. Simon said he supposed the one whose debt was bigger.

Jesus said you're right, and now let me point out something. "When I came into your house, you did not offer me any of the proper formalities for a guest – no water for my feet, no ceremonial kiss on my cheek, no welcoming ointment for my head. But this woman has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair; she has not stopped kissing my feet, and she poured perfume on my head. Therefore, I tell you, Simon, that her many sins have been forgiven – for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little."

Jesus then turned to the woman and said, "Your sins are forgiven," which caused quite a stir among all the guests. But how did Simon feel? Jesus had just told him in front of all his guests that in spite of his lavish hospitality he really didn't have much love and desperately

needed forgiveness. (Lk. 7:36-50. For parallel accounts, see Mt. 26:6-13; Mk. 14:3-9; Jn. 12:1-8)

It was all true, but was this the right way to treat a generous host? Simon would have a lot of reasons to complain to his friends afterward, “This man was not very nice.”

The Gospels mention one other social event to which Jesus was invited, a dinner party thrown by Matthew, also known as Levi, the tax collector, in Jesus’ honor. At this party, the other guests were not Pharisees and other religious leaders, but “many tax collectors and sinners.” Apparently Jesus enjoyed eating and drinking with them – the biblical accounts do not say – but the Pharisees and teachers of the law noticed who he was eating with and criticized him, not directly but to his disciples, for eating with such disreputable people. Jesus heard about it said to them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” (Mt. 9:10-13; Mk. 2:15-17; Lk. 5:29-32)

Although the Scriptures are not clear about this, it seems likely that the conversation between Jesus and the religious leaders did not take place at Levi’s house, which was crowded with the very people that the religious leaders were criticizing. It probably took place afterwards, when Jesus’ disciples told him what the leaders had said. If so, this may be the only recorded instance where Jesus was invited to a dinner and did not offend his host and/or the other guests.

To sum it up, so far as we know from Scripture, Jesus was not a quiet, polite, inoffensive guest at social events. Except at a dinner for the outcasts of the town, where he seems to have felt quite at home, Jesus did not hesitate to say what was on his mind. And what was on his mind was often not what his host and fellow guests were happy to hear. He used social oc-

casions to further his work on earth, which often meant delivering pointed moral lessons to those assembled, even to the point of being disruptive.

Jesus was not usually one of the “nice” persons on the guest list.

How Jesus encountered religious leaders.

In the earliest account we have of Jesus’ life, we find him as a 12-year-old boy conversing with religious leaders in the Temple. He had been separated from the family caravan on the journey home from celebrating the Feast of the Passover in Jerusalem. Luke tells what happened: “After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers.” (Lk. 2:46-47)

There is no suggestion here that Jesus was anything but a nice boy, very bright, a bit nerdy perhaps, but not in any way disrespectful or challenging to the religious leaders around him. If anything, they probably saw him as a future rabbinical leader, one of their own, with the right priorities. No horsing around with the other kids, just a steady focus on the law of the Lord.

A number of years later, early in Jesus’ public ministry, he began teaching in various synagogues throughout Galilee. He came to his home town, Nazareth, and as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath. Either he was asked to read the Scriptures or he volunteered to do so. He was handed the scroll for the book of Isaiah. He unrolled it until he found the place he was looking for, and then he stood up and read these words:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners

and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

(Lk. 4:18-19, quoting Isaiah 61:1-2) Then Jesus preached on this text. But if the people were expecting some inspiring words about what happened in Isaiah's day, they were quickly disappointed. He started by saying, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing," and Luke says, "Everyone was amazed at his gracious words." But then he said, "No prophet is accepted in his hometown," and pointed out that in a time of great famine the prophet Elijah was sent not to any widow in Israel, but only to a widow in Sidon, and likewise, there were many lepers in Israel, but the prophet Elisha healed only a Syrian leper named Naaman. (Lk. 4:16-27)

This seems to be the point when the religious establishment began to turn against Jesus. When those in the synagogue heard him talking about God's prophets reaching out to help non-Israelites – foreigners – they were furious and actually threw him out of the synagogue and tried to kill him. (Lk. 4:28-30)

While this incident does not single out religious leaders as opposing Jesus, there can be no doubt that either some of them were there in the synagogue (who handed Jesus the scroll?) or that the news soon spread to the religious establishment. And from then on Jesus' relationship with the religious leaders of his time was turbulent.

Whether Jesus was teaching on their turf (in the Temple or a synagogue) or somewhere else, he was often interrupted, questioned, challenged, and baited by religious leaders. How did he respond? With polite deference? With conciliatory words, seeking to harmonize his teaching with their critique? Did he back down, at least temporarily, to give the leaders their due respect? Let's look at what the Bible actually says about his interaction with religious leaders.

The first thing to note is that Jesus, not the religious leaders, was always in control of the conversation. Even before Caiaphas, the high priest, Jesus spoke boldly – when he chose to speak. Mostly he was silent. It must have been frustrating for Caiaphas, who no doubt was used to being held in awe. Certainly he expected to be answered when he asked questions. But Jesus just looked at him calmly and spoke only the devastating words that led to his execution: “Yes, I am,” he answered when Caiaphas asked if he was the Christ, the Son of God.²

No matter who he faced, Jesus was in control and spoke the plain, unvarnished truth, or else he answered with a challenging question. One day, Jesus was walking and teaching in the temple courts when he was approached by the chief priests and elders. They interrupted his teaching and asked him two questions: “By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority?”

This, of course, was not a mere quibble about *what* Jesus was teaching; it was a direct challenge to his right to do any teaching at all. Jesus did not directly answer their questions, but said he would do so if they would answer a question of his: “John’s baptism – was it from heaven, or from men?”

Now, this posed a problem for the religious leaders. They discussed it among themselves, and realized that if they said, “From heaven,” Jesus would say, “Then why didn't you believe him?” But if they said, “From men,” they were afraid of what the people might do,

² The Gospel of John also says that Jesus answered when questioned about his disciples and his teaching, saying, in effect, that he had always taught openly so they should ask those who heard him. Jn. 18:19-21. However, it is not clear from the text whether these questions came from Caiaphas or his father-in-law, Annas, the former high priest. Either way, it shows Jesus responding on his own terms to the highest religious official in the land.

because they believed that John was a prophet. So they backed down and said, “We don’t know.” Jesus replied, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.” (Mt. 21:23-27; Mk. 11:27-33; Lk. 20:1-8)

Another time, a group of Pharisees and Herodians tried to entrap him with a question about paying taxes to Caesar. They began by flattering him, saying that they knew he was a man of integrity who taught the way of God without regard for what men might think. Then they said, in effect, “So what’s your view on paying taxes to Caesar?” Cutting right through their flattery, Jesus replied, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me?” He then quickly turned the tables on them by asking them a question – “Whose portrait is on the coin used to pay taxes? – and followed it by saying, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” (Mt. 22:15-22; Mk. 12:13-17; Lk. 20:20-26)

In fact, in Jesus’ day hypocrisy seems to have been the dominant trait among the religious leaders. Jesus told his disciples, “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.” (Lk. 12:1) But this was not just a secret warning to the disciples. That’s not the way Jesus did things. He repeatedly called the Pharisees and experts in religious law “hypocrites” right to their faces. (See Mt. 15:7, 22:18; Mk. 7:6; Lk. 13:15) There is probably no more blistering criticism of anyone in the Bible than the charges Jesus hurled against the Pharisees and teachers of the Old Testament law in Mt. 23:13-36,³ where he excoriated them as, among other things, “hypocrites, “sons of Hell,” “blind guides,” “whitewashed tombs,” “snakes” and a “brood of vipers.”

Even when dealing with a religious leader who was sincerely seeking answers, Jesus

³ This chapter begins with Jesus speaking to “the crowds and to his disciples” (Mt. 23:1), but it seems clear that starting in v. 13 he turns to address the religious leaders.

did not have much patience with flattery. Nicodemus, a leading Pharisee who apparently later became a believer, first came to Jesus at night and began by saying, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.” Before he could say another word, Jesus interrupted his effusive greetings by telling him he needed to be “born again.” (Jn. 3:3)

One day Jesus and his disciples were walking through some grain fields, and his disciples began to pick some of the ripened heads of grain and eat them. Some Pharisees saw this and criticized him for letting his disciples “work” on the Sabbath, which they thought was a clear violation of the Fourth Commandment. At that point, Jesus had three choices. He could have agreed with them that, yes, technically picking grain could be seen as “work” which was prohibited on the Sabbath. He could have disagreed with their interpretation, but asked his disciples to stop picking grain to maintain peaceful relations with the religious leaders. Or he could have disputed the issue with the Pharisees.

Jesus chose to dispute the issue, and he did it not in a general, non-threatening philosophical discussion, but by directly challenging their knowledge and interpretation of Scripture. “Haven’t you read what David did ...?” he asked, and “Haven’t you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple” In other words, he challenged them on their own ground and refuted their accusations with Scripture. (Mt. 12:1-8; Mk. 2:23-28; Lk. 6:1-5)

Sometimes Jesus challenged religious leaders for what they were thinking before they even said a word. For example, when a paralyzed man was lowered through a hole in the roof of the building in which Jesus was teaching, Jesus told him his sins were forgiven. But he immediately realized that the religious leaders watching him were inwardly criticizing him for blasphemy. So he turned from the healed man and said to these leaders, “Why do you enter-

tain evil thoughts in your hearts?” And to prove that he could forgive sins (and perhaps to tweak the hostility of the religious leaders), Jesus then healed the man and sent him walking home on his own two feet. (Mt. 9:1-8; Mk. 2:1-12; Lk. 5:17-26)

One thing Jesus did *not* do was act secretly to avoid confrontation. In fact, he seemed to look for opportunities to “get in the face” of the religious authorities who opposed him. For example, sometimes Jesus’ disciples were criticized by religious leaders, but before they could answer, Jesus stepped in and took over the conversation. Thus, when Jesus was invited to the home of Matthew (Levi) the tax collector and ate dinner with a bunch of his friends, the Pharisees and experts in religious law complained *to his disciples* about Jesus eating with tax collectors and “sinners.” But all three synoptic gospels say that Jesus – not the disciples – answered their criticism. (Mt. 9:9-13; Mk. 2:13-17; Lk. 5: 27-32; see also Lk. 6:1-5)

Another time Jesus noticed a man with a withered hand in the congregation where he was teaching. According to Mark and Luke, Jesus realized that they were looking for a reason to accuse him (Mark says he was angry and distressed at their stubborn hearts), so he said to the man with the withered hand, “Get up and stand in front of everyone.” And he remained standing in front of the congregation while Jesus discussed whether it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath. (Mt. 12:9-14; Mk. 3:1-6; Lk. 6:6-11)

How do you think the man felt standing there in front of everyone, with one arm hanging limply at his side? No doubt he had always tried to hide his deformity from people, to put forth his good arm. He may have been embarrassed to have everyone staring at him. Since Jesus often went out of his way to avoid embarrassing people who were likely to be ashamed (like the woman taken in adultery), why did he risk embarrassing this man? I can only think of one reason. He wanted to force the Pharisees and teachers of the law to actually look at the

man they were so casually using as a pawn in their theological disputes with Jesus.

Finally, Jesus gave a stinging rebuke to the Pharisees and teachers of the law who questioned him about his disciples' lack of respect for their traditions. "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders?" asked these religious leaders, "They don't wash their hands before they eat!" Jesus fired back, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' ... But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God' Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition." (Mt. 15:1-6; see also Mk. 7:8-9)

Thus, as far as we can tell from the Gospels, when Jesus encountered religious leaders he was anything but deferential. He was often feisty, confrontational, what some might call blunt or even rude. He spoke "truth to power." Certainly to the Pharisees and teachers of the law, Jesus was not considered to be a nice, kindly rabbi.

It might be argued at this point that Jesus was only responding to the hostility and hypocrisy of the religious leaders of his time. He may have had many polite conversations with various Pharisees and teachers of the law that the Scriptures do not mention, or mention only incidentally.

There are some examples in Scripture of Jesus *not* lashing out at religious leaders. Once Jesus was asked by some Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, and he replied, "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you." (Lk. 17:20-21) And Jesus gave straightforward but polite answers to some Pharisees who asked him about divorce (Mt. 19:3-9; Mk. 10:2-9) and to a lawyer who asked him which is the greatest commandment

in the Law (Mt. 22:35-40; Mk. 12:28-34; Lk. 10:25-28)

These were civil answers, with no hint of challenge or rebuke. But they also seem to be exceptions to his general interactions with religious leaders. When he suspected an ulterior motive behind the question, Jesus didn't hold back. Thus, when some religious leaders came to him seeking a "sign from heaven," he said they were part of a "wicked and adulterous generation" in asking for a miraculous sign. (Mt. 12:38-39, 16:1, 4; Mk. 8:11-12; Lk. 11:16, 29)

To summarize: In the Gospels we learn that Jesus sometimes encountered Pharisees and experts in Old Testament law who were apparently really seeking his answers to their questions. Although Jesus did not show any special deference to them, he did speak to them directly and cordially. But most of the encounters of Jesus with religious leaders show us how he related to religious leaders who were often hypocritical or hostile. To these he was not what we would call "nice."

And yes, we do meet some of those today. So how do we respond to them ... with soft words and our ever-present Christian smile?

How Jesus encountered civil authorities.

Despite what he was accused of when arrested (see Lk. 23:2, "He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king."), Jesus was not a political rebel. When he was asked by a group of Pharisees and Herodians whether they should pay taxes to Caesar, he made them identify Caesar's portrait on a Roman coin and said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." (Mt. 22:15-22; Mk. 12:13-17; Lk. 20:20-26) On the other hand, when Jesus was warned by some Pharisees that King Herod wanted to kill him, Jesus replied, "Go tell that fox" (Lk. 13:31-32)

But how did Jesus behave – what did he say and do – when he came into face-to-face

contact with civil authorities? The Gospels record only one significant encounter with such an authority.⁴ After his arrest and trial before Caiphas, the high priest, Jesus was brought before the Roman governor, Pilate.

After listening to his accusers, Pilate asked Jesus, according to all four Gospels, a simple straightforward question, “Are you the king of the Jews?” But Jesus did not give a simple straightforward yes-or-no answer. Although it is clear that Jesus was acknowledging his kingship, all three synoptic gospels quote him as saying, “Yes, *it is as you say*” (NIV) or “*You have said so.*” (RSV, ESV) According to the Gospel of John, Jesus answered, “*You are right in saying I am a king*” (NIV) or “*You say that I am a king.*” (RSV, ESV) (Mt. 27:11; Mk.15:2; Lk.23:3; Jn. 18:33, 37)

Why didn’t Jesus give a ringing affirmation to his claim to be a king? Why didn’t he say something like, “Absolutely!” or “I certainly am!” or even just “Yes.” Period. Why did he seem to equivocate, or qualify his answer by tying it to his questioner (“it is as you say” or “You have said so”)?

I think the reason is that Jesus cared about what Pilate himself believed, or at least what he would take away from their conversation. Jesus was supremely confident of his divine royalty, but he did not want others to just accept his word for it. He wanted Pilate – as he wants everyone else – to have a fact-based faith. To believe based on their own experience and conclusions about Jesus.

Compare what happened when John the Baptist, who had been imprisoned by King

⁴ Jesus was also approached by a centurion who sought healing for a sick slave (Mt. 8:5-13; Lk. 7:1-10), but in this incident the centurion was acting as a private citizen, not as a Roman military official.

Herod, sent his disciples to Jesus to ask if he was the promised Messiah. When they found Jesus, they asked, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” No doubt their faces were radiant with expectancy, waiting to hear Jesus say, “Yep, I’m the one!” Instead Jesus answered, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.” (Mt. 11:2-6; Lk. 7:19-23) He wanted them to come to their own conclusion, not just to take his word for it.

So, whether with those eager to believe, like John’s disciples, or a scornful Roman governor, like Pilate (see Jn. 18:34-35), Jesus seemed to feel no need to persuade, to talk people into his Kingdom. Instead he cared about what his questioners themselves were thinking.

A second attribute of Jesus revealed in his encounter with Pilate is his utter indifference to what might happen to him at the hands of civil authorities. As far as his own rights were concerned, Jesus was almost passive. He was certainly not defensive.

When he refused to answer some of Pilate’s questions, Pilate said ominously, “Don’t you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?” Jesus was not intimidated. He said, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.” (Jn. 19:9-11) In other words, all of Pilate’s authority, all of everyone’s authority, comes from the active or permissive will of God the Father. That’s why when Jesus was hauled before Pilate, he spoke or remained silent as he wished. He knew his fate was in his heavenly Father’s hands, not Pilate’s.

A third lesson we can learn from Jesus’s encounter with civil authorities in the person of Pilate is that he was not deferential to those with high status. As with his encounters with

religious authorities, Jesus cared nothing about the reputation or standing in the community of those he faced. In that sense, he was very egalitarian.

Not that he rejected their authority. In saying, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above” (Jn. 19:11), Jesus was implicitly recognizing Pilate’s authority as governor, although at the same time he was making clear that it was a subordinate authority – under God. As an example, when questioned about paying taxes to the Roman emperor, Caesar, he uttered his famous aphorism, “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” (Mt. 22:21; Mk. 12:17; Lk. 20:25). However difficult it may be in some circumstances to decide what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God, it is very clear that Jesus believed that both have authority that is to be respected.

But acknowledging human authorities is very different from simply deferring to their status, to submitting because they demand submission. Jesus did not do that with Pilate, or with anyone else.

Conclusion.

Classic Christianity claims that when Jesus came to earth he was fully human as well as fully divine. It is perhaps impossible to fully understand this admixture of humanity and divinity, but this much we can say: To the extent that Jesus lived among us as a human, we should strive to be like him. If he is the “image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15), he is also the visible image of the perfect human, the man (and woman) created in God’s image (Gen. 1:26). As he was in the world, so we should be.

This means we should try to set aside our natural assumptions of what Jesus was like, which may be shaped more by our culture than our Bible, and ponder deeply the way Jesus

walked among men and women 2,000 years ago. We can do that best by studying the pages of the four gospels.

Here's what my study of Jesus' interaction with people shows me: With those who were needy or hurting in some way, often poor and looked down upon by others, he was kind, tender, and, yes, nice. But that is not the way Jesus acted with his disciples and other followers. While he could be patient and kind to them, he was more often strict, demanding, and even critical ("You of little faith!"). He never tried to curry favor, or win them over with ingratiating words. To those who were on his side he invariably spoke plainly and directly.

A number of accounts in the gospels show Jesus at banquets and other social affairs. Here we see a most surprising side of Jesus. With one exception, Jesus could not reasonably be called a nice guest. He often challenged the hosts, criticized the guests, and asked embarrassing questions. He was provocative and challenging. Interestingly, the one time he did not act this way was at a dinner party attended by the disreputable, irreligious rabble of the town. There it seems he could relax and just be a nice guy.

Jesus also encountered people in positions of authority, both religious leaders and one civil leader, Pilate, the Roman governor. The most positive spin we can give to these encounters is to say that Jesus was not deferential or accommodating. In fact, with the Pharisees and other religious leaders, he was outspoken in criticizing their motives and their actions, calling them hypocrites and worse. He never seemed to back down, or try to avoid a confrontation, and he was quick to point out where they were wrong. Any objective reader of his encounters with religious leaders would have to say that he was at least provocative, seemingly aggressive, and utterly straightforward. He was not what most people would call "nice" to religious leaders.

Finally, how did Jesus act toward civil authorities? Although we have only the example of his encounter with the Roman governor, Pilate, from that I conclude that Jesus respected civil authority, but was well aware of its limited scope. He answered Pilate only when the question was critical to everyone's (including Pilate's) understanding of exactly who Jesus was ("Are you the king of the Jews?"). Nor was Jesus defensive or fearful of what might happen to him, even when threatened with death. He knew that his future was in his Heavenly Father's hands. He even seemed to evince an indirect concern for what Pilate himself believed, as shown by Jesus' qualified answer to the question about his kingship ("it is as you say" or "You have said so").

Jesus met all kinds of people during his brief years on earth. His demeanor in every encounter was true to his own nature, seemingly without much concern about what others would think of his words and conduct. Where should we place him on a scale of niceness, based on the Scriptural evidence? Except for his dealings with needy people, Jesus just doesn't score very high, and sometimes he was near the bottom.

How very different from what many believers today consider to be model Christian behavior!

– Roland F. Chase
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