

# 9. THE PROPHETIC JESUS



**FOCUS:** Jesus was a troublemaker. He said and did things that were upsetting to agents of the political and religious domination systems that oppressed the weak and downtrodden. In this way, Jesus stood firmly in the tradition of the prophets of Hebrew Scripture – those who offered a clear and challenging “alternative script” to the status quo.

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## LIKE A PROPHET OF OLD

It's no accident that the words most frequently recorded in Hebrew Scripture are: “Do not be afraid.” Neither is it an accident that the second most frequently recorded passage in Hebrew Scripture is the admonition to “care for the orphan, the widow, and the stranger.” The prophets tell us that the duty of the people of God is to care about and be the advocates for the poor and powerless. It should be no surprise, then, that according to the Gospels, Jesus' first concern is for those in the community who are most vulnerable and have no voice. This compassion Jesus exhibits is hardly original – the same passion underlies all of the Hebrew Scriptures.

*“[Jesus] opened the book and found the place where it was written, ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.’ And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’”*

– Jesus quoting *Isaiah* in *Luke 4:17b – 21*

Yet speaking out on behalf of people who have no power or advocates has never been popular with respectable society. While it's clear that the prophets and other Biblical sources make care for the downtrodden the duty of the people of God, it has always been much easier to make the spiritual life about following specific rules and embracing whatever priorities the community deems as reputable. Confronting the shortcomings of one's culture or society has never been a popular path.

## A STRANGER IN THE MIDST OF HIS OWN PEOPLE

For this and many other reasons, Jesus is a stranger in the midst of his own people. Even according to the Gospels, nearly from the moment he proclaimed the call of *Isaiah* fulfilled, he has been misunderstood and discredited for his most prophetic statements.

*Jesus said: "A prophet is not acceptable in his own country, neither does a physician work cures upon those that know him."*

– Gospel of Thomas 31

Today, Jesus has been misused so often by so many, it's no surprise that many of the priorities, practices, and teachings of the Jesus represented in the Gospels are ignored or intentionally contradicted by the institutional church. Jesus has become so lost in so many churches that to talk about the radical implications of what's really in the Gospels often triggers howls of "revisionism." Despite the varying witnesses of the Synoptic Gospels, one characteristic is consistent throughout: Jesus raised a prophetic voice that critiqued, questioned, and confronted the status quo.

*"If the dominant script in the Old Testament has to do with the priests and kings in Jerusalem and if the dominant script in the New Testament has to do with the Roman Empire and the collusion of the Jewish leaders with the Roman Empire, then the dominant script in both Testaments has to do with centralized power and the power to tax and control and mobilize armies and defend oneself and make oneself secure. Then the alternative script of the prophets and of Jesus and the apostles is that the juices of life are running loose in the world below the radar and the visible leadership can neither manage, nor control, nor resist them. They're simply out there doing new things."*

– Walter Brueggemann in LtQ's  
*Countering Pharaoh's Production/Consumption Society Today*

The bottom line is that in the eyes of the first century authorities – both religious and political – Jesus was a troublemaker. He was simply "out there" saying and "doing new things" that were upsetting to the established order. He offered a first hand relationship with the Divine that bypassed the religion of ritual that was the Sadducees' bread and butter. He ignored the Pharisees' interpretations about what was acceptable to do or not do on the Sabbath. He flew in the face of the Deuteronomic Code of divine earthly retribution and forgave people's sins. And most troubling of all, he not only associated with the wrong kind of people – sinful, impure, disreputable – he even ATE with them!

The teachings and the example of Jesus had the effect of undermining and subverting the prevailing religion and politics of both his time and ours. People forget that not only is Hebrew scripture full of the stories of violently rejected prophets but even Christianity's foremost leaders were so threatening that they were executed by the government. Jesus, and most likely Paul, were done away with by the political authorities they confronted. While the circumstances of Paul's death are unclear, we know that Jesus was killed because his notions of justice and community were so intimidating to the powers that be that they felt it necessary to eliminate him.

## BEST IGNORE HIM

If you haven't been made uncomfortable by the teachings of Jesus, you probably haven't understood them. Truth be told, despite efforts across the centuries to tame him, Jesus is still controversial. Beware of all greed, he said, because our true life is not made up of what we own – no matter how much we have. Blessed are the peacemakers. Those who live by the sword will die by the sword. Do not forget the humanity of even your enemy. Be compassionate with all people just as God is compassionate. If you are not able to forgive, you will not be forgiven. Let the one of you who wants to condemn and to judge be sure you yourself are sinless before you cast the first stone. Do not worship power and status and prestige, and do not aim for those yourself; instead, learn to be a servant.

In a culture where greed and domination are worshipped, talk of the “common good” is suspect, and the media obsesses on the sensationalized exploits of celebrities, the prophetic words of Jesus are countercultural and subversive. Even in the Lord's Prayer, when Jesus teaches his disciples to pray for God's will to be done and for God's kingdom to come on earth, it has to be admitted that any serious attempt to realize that prayer can only be seen as revolutionary. Biblical scholar Raymond Brown says that Jesus is so unknown to us and is so troubling to conventional religion and conventional life even to this day, that if he came back today, the first thing we would do is kill him. The Jesus of the Gospels is a cultural prophet, undermining any culture that worships affluence, appearance, and achievement. It's basically safest to just not take Jesus too seriously – best to do what the culture and institutional church have done for generations: just ignore him.

So, it should be no surprise that Jesus saved his harshest words for the comfortable – those who think they belong in the inner circle with God. He saw them becoming self-righteous and narrow and thinking that the circle of God's family was pretty small. Jesus earned their wrath because he drew the circle wide.

*“The Jesus of history is one who was passionate about the least of these. But I think the church has sometimes, maybe more often than not in its history, used the story of Jesus not to include people and not for the sake of the least of these, but has frequently used the story of Jesus to judge people, to exclude people, even to beat up on people, especially infidels, the non-Christians throughout the middle ages and so forth; but, also it continues in our own time. Jesus' passion about the love of God for the least of these gets transformed into, ‘You've gotta believe the following things about Jesus’ (and those are usually doctrinal things) or, ‘God's gonna get you in the end, and in the meantime you're not welcome here either.’”*

– Marcus Borg in *Living the Questions*

More often than not, we let the culture around us form us into its mold and then are troubled or even shocked when the Bible contradicts our beliefs or biases

about how things should be. But reading the Bible closely – and Jesus’ teachings in particular – will be uncomfortable at times. As we listen carefully, we will hear both the prophets and Jesus attempting to move us beyond ourselves and our own concerns. We will find Jesus talking not only about personal change but social change – and their words may cause us to squirm and re-examine our priorities.

## MAKING IT REAL

*"We must also preach the whole Gospel which not only calls people to love Jesus but to bring his justice into the political and economic arena in which we live."*

– Tony Campolo

This prophetic Jesus not only challenges our person-to-person relationships but our social and political involvement as well. This is where things become more complicated and more emotional for some people. What may need to be done may be more controversial. Catholic Bishop Dom Helder Camara of Brazil experienced this phenomenon firsthand when he began to speak out for social reforms in his country. He said, "When I gave food to the poor, they called me a saint. When I began to ask why there were so many poor, they called me a communist."

Southern Baptist pastor and scholar, Clarence Jordan, lived in Georgia and started an interracial farming community called the Koinonia Farm. It was here that Millard Fuller came for a retreat and formed the idea for Habitat for Humanity. Before Dr. Jordan’s community gave birth to Habitat, he was a pioneer in the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. He would often preach as a guest in little Baptist churches and would usually not get invited back because of his message of equality for all people of all colors. On one occasion he had given a sermon that called for our country to stop the practice of segregation. After the sermon, a lady came up to him and said, "My granddaddy was an officer in the Confederate army and he would not believe a word that you just said about race relations." Clarence Jordan smiled sweetly and said, "Well, ma’am, your choice is very clear then. You can follow your granddaddy or you can follow Jesus."

Clarence Jordan was a lot like Jesus. He was willing to let people hear the hard demands of his message and to let them walk away if they found his words so troubling or offensive.

In the Uniting Church of Australia, Rev. Dorothy McRae-McMahon has been an outspoken prophetic voice for justice for many years. From standing up to racist Neo-Nazis in the late 80s to her prolific work in re-working the liturgical resources of the church, her voice has been heard loud and clear among those who would otherwise lobby unopposed for the status quo. Although officially retired, her prophetic voice has now taken on a new and vibrant form. Attending the local

Uniting Church in Redfern, a Sydney suburb rife with crime and poverty, Dorothy became frustrated at the lack of positive community efforts in the neighborhood.

Along with her pastor, partner, and a variety of volunteers (including journalism students looking for experience), Dorothy and the South Sydney Uniting Church began publishing a free monthly independent newspaper with the intent of holding government & business leadership to account, building pride in the community, and reporting positive news. Now with a circulation of over 22,000, *The South Sydney Herald* ([www.southsydneyherald.com.au](http://www.southsydneyherald.com.au)) is a force to be reckoned with in the city. It's not unusual for the Lord Mayor of Sydney or other community leaders to call Rev. McRae-McMahon to complain about how their positions or actions are portrayed in the newspaper – along with the promise to mend their ways. From an otherwise small and eminently ignorable Uniting Church in a voiceless, backwater neighborhood, the voice of the prophetic Jesus is heard.

*“God is in the slums, in the cardboard boxes where the poor play house. God is in the silence of a mother who has infected her child with a virus that will end both their lives. God is in the cries heard under the rubble of war. God is in the debris of wasted opportunity and lives, and God is with us if we are with them.”*

– U2's Bono, *National Prayer Breakfast*, 2006

## JUSTICE, KINDNESS, & HUMILITY

Most of us don't really know who he was. His priorities, practices and teachings – even his humanity – have largely been lost to the community of faith that should know him best. Partly out of tradition, partly out of apathy, but mostly because to truly embrace the political, economic, and religious implications of his message is threatening, the prophetic Jesus has been de-emphasized by many.

*Jesus the Jew, Jesus the historical figure, Jesus of Nazareth was concerned about economics, was concerned about politics, was concerned about justice.*

– A.-J. Levine in LtQ's *Saving Jesus*

The prophetic Jesus was interested in economic reform, politics, and justice for the poor to the point that it's fair to say we truly can't make sense of our discipleship as followers of Jesus if economics, justice, and the needs of the outcast are not part of our discipline and practice.

Although Jesus doesn't ask people to admire him and (in the Synoptic Gospels, at least) never asks people to worship him, Jesus has many millions of admirers and worshippers. Yet those inclined to worship him would do well to note how Jesus always points beyond himself. He invites people to follow him, to imitate him in his commitment to the least and the last, and in his passion to put the Mystery of God at the center of one's life.

While uncomfortable at first, the call of the prophetic Jesus is to move people from being admirers to followers – to help people sense that the respectable values of the status quo may not be so important after all. It reminds us – no matter how hard we try to make it about personal piety alone – that the Kingdom of God has always and will always be about politics.

Micah 6:8 puts it succinctly: “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Jesus followed in this prophetic tradition and put the obligation to fulfill this call squarely on the shoulders of those who call themselves disciples: “As you have done it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you have done it to me.” (Matthew 25:40)

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## DVD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*(note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story)*

### **DVD Chapter 2:**

In claiming the mantle of the prophets, Jesus claims a variety of ministries and actions. List and discuss some of these prophetic characteristics.

According to Varghese, what are some of the traits of Jesus’ ministry that set him apart from the prophets of old?

How do anger and righteous indignation play into the expression of a prophetic voice?

### **DVD Chapter 3:**

How do the admonitions of the Sermon on the Plain characterize the prophetic life?

How does Ehrlander's cartoon sync with your experience?

According to Flunder, it is essential for the "personal piety piece" and "justice work" to be brought together. Explain.

**DVD Chapter 4:**

Describe the observations and practices of Mahatma Gandhi that have been influential to Mel White.

**SPIRITPRACTICE:**

"No More Deaths" ([www.nomoredeaths.org](http://www.nomoredeaths.org)) with Rick Ufford-Chase

**Questions for Personal Reflection:**

What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material in this session?

What implications does this material have for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

**Consider the following questions as a group:**

What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?

**Be sure to follow up on this session's theme with Session 9's *Living it Out: "Truth Teller, Change Seeker, Life Bringer,"* distributed by your facilitator.**