
Heart and Soul ... A Weekly Meditation

April 17, 2016

Reducing Jesus

*“When Simon Peter saw the catch, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said,
‘Leave me, Lord, for I’m a sinner!’”*

Luke 5:8 (Common English Bible)

Harry Emerson Fosdick once commented to his congregation, the Riverside Church in the City of New York, that “Many people have pretty much reduced their Christianity to admiration of Jesus.”ⁱ Initially, this seems rather harmless. Jesus is a glorious character – a G rated individual in an R rated world. The beauty and strength of Jesus provides comfortable – and safe – fodder for family-friendly conversation, a Disney-like character to share with children at bedtime. His compassion, his high moral code, and his extravagant forgiveness remain beyond reproach. Here is an individual that sets the bar high for our own living. It would be difficult to find anyone who does not admire this man.

Yet, it is precisely that admiration of Jesus that creates so much difficulty. We cast our eyes upon Jesus, note his exceptional life and obedience to God, and then we look in the mirror. There is present a gulf, as wide as the east is from the west, between the man Jesus was, and is, and who we are. Yes, our admiration for Jesus is great. But consider the effect that has upon our own self-image. Few of us will possess the musical greatness of Mozart, the artistic talent of Michelangelo or political savvy of Lincoln. And no one will possess the lofty moral greatness of Jesus. We admire Jesus from a distance. But who can ever approach his character in their own life? That is why Peter said to Jesus, “Leave me, Lord, for I’m a sinner!” Jesus’ flawlessness also makes him the most disturbing personality we ever face.

It is precisely this reason, says Fosdick, that we don’t instinctively run to Jesus. Instinctively we try to escape him. We cannot live with ourselves and with Jesus.ⁱⁱ Anyone who takes Jesus seriously moves quickly beyond admiration to echo Peter’s anguish. Jesus is reduced to an extraordinary man that no one can ever, adequately, emulate. Jesus may be our ideal but the contrast between who we are and who Jesus is stirs exhaustion and despair. Anyone who doesn’t experience the hopelessness of Peter simply hasn’t taken Jesus seriously.

The Good News is that the Bible has more to say about Jesus. Jesus is extraordinary in love and obedience. This is all true. But more than this, Jesus is the revelation of God’s desire to infuse our lives with the same strength and power we see in the person of Jesus. If Jesus were only a teacher, telling us how we ought to live, then despair would be ours. By our own strength and determination of will, we cannot live as Christ teaches. But what the disciples soon learned is that Jesus not only presented a clear vision of another way of life, Jesus was the conduit of God’s power for moving toward that vision. What a difference that makes! And it is that discovery by Peter that turned his first revolt from Christ to abiding, joyful hope.

Doug Hood

ⁱ Harry Emerson Fosdick, “Taking Jesus Seriously,” **Riverside Sermons** (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), 284.

ⁱⁱ Fosdick, 285.