

10 Misconceptions of the Christian Faith

#7 Jesus Was Just a Moral Teacher

Many accept that Jesus of Nazareth was a great moral teacher and an important historical figure, but understanding Jesus as the Christ means that he was more than this.

Who did Jesus claim to be?

The New Testament offers many examples of Jesus portraying himself as more than just a teacher. Jesus claimed to be the Christ (Greek for “the anointed”, meaning God’s promised Savior) and the Son of God (Mark 14:61), to be able to forgive sins (Mark 2:5-11, Luke 7:36-50), and to be the only way to the God the Father (John 14:6). These statements of Jesus were claims to divinity. They drew the most vehement (and polarized) responses during his life. On the one hand, his claims that he and his Father (God) were one (John 10:30) enraged the Jewish religious leaders, who did not believe that his miracles and words were from God. Their anger ultimately led to his death. On the other hand, because of his wisdom, compassion and what he did for people, Jesus drew a large following of those who believed his claims. He was even worshiped during his life (John 9:38).

Teaching people how to live was only part of his purpose. His primary purpose was to die and be raised from the dead in order to remove the sin that separates man from God, thus reconciling mankind with its creator. On a secondary level, Jesus taught humanity how to act in light of the reconciliation with God that comes through him. The assertion that Jesus was just a moral teacher ignores Jesus’ own claims that were central to both his life and his death.

How could he claim this?

For Jesus to be the Christ, he would have had to be both fully divine and fully human. Both are evidenced in Jesus’ life:

1. Jesus was fully divine.

Within the New Testament, there is evidence that Jesus exhibited power over the material world. He demonstrated his omnipotence over physical matters by calming storms (Matthew 8:26-27), multiplying fish and loaves of bread (Matthew 14:19), and changing water into wine (John 2:1-11). Jesus also demonstrated omniscience about both the thoughts (Mark 2:8) and spirits (Mark 3:1-5) of people. More importantly, Jesus was completely sinless (John 8:46), and thus able to be a perfect, unblemished sacrifice for our sins.

2. He was also fully human.

Jesus had a human mind, body and emotions. Throughout his life, Jesus experienced temptation and suffering: hunger, poverty, homelessness, pain, sorrow, and ultimately death. Because of this, Jesus understood the full breadth of human experience, and reached out to those who were the lowest of the low in society. God himself came to be one of us as the ultimate act of love *for us*.

Why is it important that Jesus was both fully divine and fully human?

Hebrews 2: 14-15, 17-18 explains,

“Because God’s children are human beings – made of flesh and blood – Jesus also became flesh and blood by being born in human form. For only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of the Devil, who had the power of death. Only in this way could he deliver those who have lived all their lives as slaves to the fear of dying... Therefore, it was necessary for Jesus to be in every respect like us, his brothers and sisters, so that he could be our merciful and faithful High Priest before God. He then could offer a sacrifice that would take away the sins of the people. Since he himself has gone through suffering and temptation, he is able to help us when we are being tempted.”

Jesus became human in order to be our substitute sacrifice. It is indeed one of the most profound mysteries that the infinite, omnipotent, eternal Son of God would become man and join himself to a human nature so that he could take on the sins of the world for us. As both divine and human, Jesus is the Savior—the Christ—that we so desperately need.

The things that Jesus instructed us to do are foundational to having full, worthwhile lives. But in implementing them, we must recognize Jesus both as the one who enables us to obey his commands, and as the one who covers and forgives the manifold times we fail to obey his commands. To attempt the former without the latter is to neglect the greater part of Jesus’ teaching.

As C.S. Lewis asserted, claiming that Jesus was just a great teacher is something we cannot do:

“You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

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