

“JESUS RAISES THE BAR ON BEING HUMAN”

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Today I begin with a confession. I hire a trainer every Monday to make me more fit, to heal me of injuries, to show me how to become healthy. Maybe that doesn't shock you. After all, no few here do this. But let me elaborate. I already know the exercises that I should do, how often to do them, and the right foods. John isn't teaching drills I don't already know. I could look up the rest online or in a manual. But in truth—and why I confess it—is *I wouldn't do* the exercises or observe the practices without John looming over me. My ability to get strong or do right on my own is scant, even laughable. I need another outside standard invoked over me.

Part of it is how—despite my many excuses--John raises the bar much higher than what I believe I'm capable of and what my arthritis suggests I am able to do. Part of it is how John deeply believes I can do it, then inspires me to get it done. I realize I am not alone in developing a fondness for my trainer despite all of the “are you kidding?” things he asks of me, and how my body aches for days after. Despite the pain, those who help us rise into what we are meant to be endear us.

Now, what if I said that what holds true in the physical realm is no less true in the spiritual? What if I said that Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount isn't a moralistic scold or street corner crank telling us that if you let yourself feel anger, then you are a murderer; or if you have dirty fantasies about someone, you are an adulterer. And you can expect to burn in hell, because you'll never be good enough.

So why does Jesus do this? Why push so hard? Why expect so much? Why not let us just coast along? The answer is because so much is at stake. And if we find forbidding the darkness we perceive as a new year starts, we can at least be glad for the wakeup call that slouching in the face of testing is not good enough. In a day when the governments of this world falter, the star of the church is rising.

What if I said we have no idea what good we are capable of and how much pain, suffering, and evil in the world might be vanquished by just stretching ourselves? What if I said Jesus not only lays down the challenge despite its seeming impossibility but also shows us together how to live our best and highest lives? We are incapable of this by ourselves. It would never occur to us without the church.

We've heard it said people like you and me respond best to positive messages that affirm and support us. But I say to you clear-eyed Jesus is willing to motivate us by prodding us out of our complacency like any good coach or teacher. You have heard it said faith is all about us and the Bible meets our deepest personal needs. But I say to you right here Jesus couldn't care less about massaging our egos or our needs because he is frying the bigger fish of mobilizing a movement aiming to save the whole world. This sermon is Jesus' boot camp. And if you've

ever been through any kind of a boot camp—athletic, military, academic---it is not about your feelings. It's all about getting equipped for something bigger than you.

Jesus wasn't into spiritual superheroes as myths or legends unto themselves. He wasn't vying for more saintly plaster statues in church courtyards. No, he was into equipping ordinary persons for the extraordinary destinies God had in mind. Do you remember how last Sunday, I described Jesus squatting in the dust with his band of followers, telling them, "I'll take over the world with you. God's revolution for good begins today. And you're my special forces to defeat Rome. You!"

That actually happened. Details are sketchy, but we know some things. Andrew, a fisherman disciple, went to a place called 'the land of the man-eaters,' today's Russia. He ended up crucified in Greece. Thomas was most active, ending up in India, dying on the spears of four soldiers. When Philip invited the wife of a Roman proconsul in North Africa into the faith, the proconsul saw to his death. Matthew the tax collector was in Persia and Ethiopia with an uncertain demise. Simon the Zealot in Persia was executed for refusing to worship a sun god. On and on go these stories. Both Paul and Peter landed in Rome when insane Nero was emperor. One was beheaded, the other crucified upside down. You get the idea.

Their aim was to bring Rome to its knees. Remember worldly empires differ from the Jesus movement in that empires menace, coerce, threaten, and eventually kill for what they believe in. With Jesus, we enter into the struggle, suffering, persecution of others, even to the point of being willing to die for what we believe in. So in Rome, the early church was feeding up to 50,000 starving street people a day. The church pulled infants--mostly girls of course--thrown into the Tiber River out of their watery death, and raising them as their own beloved children of God. We do well to remember these histories if we truly are headed into a darker time.

In recent decades, many have equated following Jesus with being a nice person. All indicators say we won't get away with such feel-good sentimentality much longer. In my lifetime, more and more people have left the church, not to unite with different religions, but for a Sunday brunch with croissants and camaraderie. Why not be good without God? is our saggy, modern creed. That won't stand up.

So if Jesus preaches a muscular form of Christianity in his Sermon on the Mount, it is because he would never send his disciples unprepared into a menacing world. When I say muscular Christianity, I don't mean macho. I mean a faith that is lean, not flabby; a faith where at bottom we know who we are and what we can expect. We are incapable of giving ourselves such a faith. The church mediates it to us.

Jesus sounds like he is going after our outward behaviors, but he's digging into the core of our personal discipline, creating a rough and ready inward disposition. Why does this matter? When we must decide between standing up for unpopular and counterintuitive truths or going along with lies that everyone calls reality, we'll be ready. We won't blink. We won't flinch. And we will be ready to pay the price.

Do you recall the 1980s film, *Chariots of Fire*? It traces the life of the young Scot Eric Liddell, and four other Cambridge Englishmen runners in the 1924 Olympics. There was nothing macho about Liddell. Much about him seemed tender, gentle. Except when others saw how passionate Liddell became as he ran, a veritable "wild animal." Crossing the channel to France, he learns he has a heat on a Sunday. Observing the Sabbath to clear space for God meant something back then.

At a white tie gala reception in Paris, Liddell is pulled into a drawing room. Two lords, a duke, and the Prince of Wales apply imperial power to change his mind, "a little chat." "I won't run on the Sabbath," Liddell tells the would-be English king. "And that's final." It reminds me of Sandy Koufax refusing to pitch on Yom Kippur in my boyhood. You had to admire the guy...A compromise is reached where Liddell switches events with another runner and the relief is palpable in the room.

The royals analyze it after Liddell departs. Good thing an alternative was posed, one says. Yes, says another, Liddell had us beat. But in truth if we'd won, we'd have severed the nerve to his faith, which is the same passion and discipline that makes his running great. As moderns, a voice inside says, why so uptight, Eric? Why not run on a Sunday? Ultimately, what's the big deal? Does it matter really? Beloved of God first and last, muscular Christians know that no one else owns us.

Eric Liddell was the son of Congregational missionaries in China. Later in life he returned to that mission as a pastor, traversing China on foot and bicycle, teaching and founding new churches. He died in a Japanese war camp, refusing to flee the mainland as Japan invaded. Maybe Hirohito didn't scare him because he didn't blink in the face of the Prince of Wales. His efforts were not in vain. Did you know by 2030 China will claim more Christians than any nation on earth? Maybe it's worth sweating the details and maybe the genius of everything is in the details.

Muscular Christians know and trust the enigmatic and paradoxical truth of Jesus' promises. "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." (John 12:34) There's nothing sentimentally self-affirming about who we already are within that.

Most of us are content to avoid doing bad things. We say things like, "I may not be a saint, but at least I'm no adulterer." Here Jesus cuts the ground from beneath such dismal expectations, naming that one as much a sinner as any adulterer. Jesus raises the bar. Jesus shapes and molds our inward being, showing us the way to God. You can call him a moralistic scold, if you want to. Or perhaps Jesus simply believes in us more than we believe in ourselves, what we are capable of.

We Christians believe the one who preached this Sermon on the Mount not only forgave us, justified us, but also showed us the way to our fullest human stature. "God does not demand impossible things of us," Aquinas wrote, "but enables us to do all things in his name." Call that freedom. Call that strength. It is of God. Amen.