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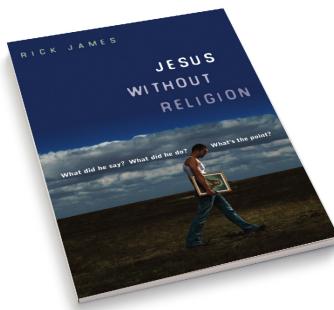
VULGAR—THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS

JESUS WITHOUT RELIGION CHAPTER EXCERPT

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JESUS WITHOUT RELIGION



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Coarse Words, Shocking Speech

At roughly the age of thirty, the time when most young men are just moving out of their parents' basement, Jesus began his life's work. His time in the public eye lasted roughly three years, but that still translates into hundreds of spoken messages. Itinerant preaching is similar to political canvassing (except the messages are generally true, not generally lies) in that the speaker often uses a basic palette of messages, slightly altered as the occasion or audience requires. We can therefore presume that Jesus gave versions of the same message on multiple occasions and that preserved within the Gospels are what Jesus' followers considered his essential, stock teachings.

We should also presume that Jesus' spoken sermons and messages were not nearly so compact as they are found in the Bible. If, as the Gospels imply, Jesus preached for many hours, we're missing a good bit of discourse and—who knows?—maybe even some first-century humor, whatever that might have looked like. But this sort of abbreviation is common to all reporting. When a newspaper headline reads “President okays labor agreement,”¹ we don't assume that the president sat stupefied for a three-hour meeting, only to rise at the end of it and decree, “Okay.” Most of Jesus' sayings have a poetic phrasing and rhythm to them because they were meant to be delivered verbally and memorized.

“The first shall last and the last shall be first,” for example, is a tightly packed conceptual suitcase made to travel well to another audience or culture, even down through the ages.

In first-century Judaism rabbis employed disciples to memorize, preserve and pass on their key sayings. Disciples were not groupies or some amp-toting road crew but more in the order of apprentices. Jesus chose twelve such disciples:

Simon (whom he named Peter), his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon who was called the Zealot, Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor. (Luke 6:13-16)

Jesus’ selection of twelve, as opposed to fourteen or four, was clearly a symbolic act. Israel as a nation was a composite of twelve separate tribes, so the choosing of twelve disciples communicated a message to the effect of “Here is the true Israel” or “I’m putting the old Israel up for auction on eBay” or something. Understandably, this less than subtle message would not have been warmly received by Israel’s leaders.

For the three years that followed, these twelve men would eat, sleep, and absorb everything Jesus did and said. And as we turn to their record of his teachings within the Gospels, we find summarizing an easier task than we might have imagined, for by and large Jesus’ sermons fit snugly under the heading “The Kingdom of God.”

Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him. (Luke 8:1)

Or to flip it around, to understand the nature of the kingdom of God—its values, how one enters it, and who reigns over it—is to have understood the teaching of Jesus.

Kingdom Come

[Jesus] went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

“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.”

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:16-21)

As Jesus walked from town to town, it was not unusual for an inquisitive soul to approach with a question and receive a response from him as comprehensible as Beowulf. But here, in the opening words of his public ministry, Jesus was anything but veiled: “The Messiah has come, and by the way, you’re looking at him.” The prophecy he read, from the book of Isaiah, is a clear reference to the coming of the Messiah, and in saying it had been fulfilled, Jesus placed the Messiah’s crown upon his own head, to the shock of all in attendance.

Sometimes, when sitting in a formal or solemn gathering such as a church service, I picture what would happen if I stood up and blurted out a string of obscenities. From there, I imagine other humiliating scenarios: chuckling during a funeral, oinking like a pig during the ex-

change of vows at a wedding—basically, the most socially inappropriate behavior conceivable. I'm really not sure why I do this—maybe I lacked adequate human contact at an early age or was left behind on a family trip to the circus, who knows—but imagining the utter humiliation such behavior would cause me, especially in the midst of close friends and family, gives me considerable empathy for Jesus in this story.

The scene took place in Nazareth, where Jesus was raised, and the synagogue would have been packed with friends, family, peers, just about everyone who knew him from childhood. And in front of them all he stood and made this shocking confession, knowing that most, if not all, would think he had lost his mind. Even for the Messiah, this had to take some serious testosterone. Due to my own inflated sense of dignity, I'm ashamed to admit that I would have rather oinked like a pig in front of loved ones than make such an outrageous statement.

But with Jesus, profundity lurked not only in what he said but also in what he left unsaid, when he was absent as much as when he was present. Jesus' public reading in the synagogue came from what we now call chapter 61 in the book of Isaiah. If you look up the verse in its context, you'll notice that he stopped short of its completion:

. . . to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor
and the day of vengeance of our God (Isaiah 61:2)

Jesus said that he had come “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor,” but the text continues on to state, “and the day of vengeance of our God” (Isaiah 61:2). Why didn’t Jesus read the entire sentence?

Jesus’ censorship highlights the nature of his ministry. The second part of the verse—the Day of Judgment—will come soon enough, but that day is not today. Jesus was proclaiming grace, forgiveness, the year of the Lord’s favor: “Come in now and all debts will be canceled.” This general description, more than any specific act, reveals the true heart of

Jesus' ministry, because it is as he himself defined it.

Bono, famed humanitarian, musician and iPod user, gave this insightful summary of Jesus' category-shattering ministry of grace.

At the center of all religions is the idea of Karma. You know, what you put out comes back to you: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, or in physics—in physical laws—every action is met by an equal or an opposite one. It's clear to me that Karma is at the very heart of the universe. I'm absolutely sure of it. And yet, along comes this idea called Grace to upend all that “as you reap, so you will sow” stuff. Grace defies reason and logic. Love interrupts, if you like, the consequences of your actions, which in my case is very good news indeed, because I've done a lot of stupid stuff. . . .

The point of the death of Christ is that Christ took on the sins of the world, so that what we put out did not come back to us, and that our sinful nature does not reap the obvious death. That's the point. It should keep us humbled. . . . It's not our own good works that get us through the gates of heaven.²

Whatever else the kingdom of God may be, it is about grace. Under this new administration, unimaginable terms of surrender are offered to all moral and spiritual rebels. “Turn yourselves in and all crimes will be forgotten, all records expunged. Throw down your guns!” Having delivered these inaugural words in the synagogue at Nazareth, the ministry of Jesus starts with a gunshot, summoning the attention of all Israel and beginning a race that would last roughly three years, until it ended in a state-sanctioned lynching.

A Kingdom of Losers

Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed [Jesus].

Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 4:25—5:12)

Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount generally, and these “beatitudes” specifically, are a little like an Italian opera: everyone agrees that the words are beautiful, we just have no idea what he’s saying.

What, for example, could he possibly have meant by such obvious

contradictions as “blessed [“happy,” or “lucky”] are the poor in spirit [“unhappy,” or “unlucky”]”? There seem to be two answers, both related to the admittance policy of the kingdom of God.

“Everyone is welcome.” This is Article 1 of the kingdom’s admission policy. Fidel Castro, enraged by all the people escaping his Communist government in Cuba to take refuge in the United States, emptied his prisons and put them all on boats bound for Miami Beach. Did we send them back? No. On principle, everyone is welcome in the United States: give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, and all that stuff.

“Did I say ‘everyone’? Well, not really everyone.” This is Article 2 of the admission policy. What Jesus was describing in the Beatitudes is the state of heart of a person who is best able to receive the message of the kingdom. And that clearly is not everybody. The entrance restriction lies not with the kingdom itself—all really are welcome—but with the heart of the person who rejects it.

To better understand this point, we’ll need momentary use of a trite metaphor; let’s go with a fireplace. Some hearts are like a fireplace stuffed with dry kindling and a Duraflame log: the slightest spark, and it will all go up like a Roman candle. Other hearts, however, —mushy, moldy, magotty—wouldn’t light if they were doused with propane and wired to C-4 explosives. As a result, when people come in contact with the message of the kingdom, they react differently. Some immediately spark to it. Others take time to warm to it. Still others have slipped below the freezing point—tragically, there seems to be nothing within them for the message to ignite.

The reason why being poor in spirit, mourning, being lowly and thirsting for righteousness are blessed states is that they permit no delusions that life and happiness can be found in sex, wealth, drugs, status, travel, entertainment or anything that has a remote control. A desperate alcoholic and a repentant prostitute in such an economy are closer to finding

God because they experience a real hunger for God—the awareness that only God can meet their hunger. The religiously numb, wealthy, self-sufficient and morally jaded are oblivious to the true state of their own heart, mistakenly thinking that they are already in the kingdom, that there is no kingdom or that being in the kingdom is of no consequence. Such self-delusion is the opposite of being “blessed.” Jesus distills the essence of our lives down to a simple question: What do you crave? Some hunger and thirst for the kingdom; some hunger and thirst for everything but. Some enter the kingdom; some do not.

Martin Luther, the German leader of the Protestant Reformation, was asked when exactly he entered God’s kingdom and came to faith. His response was *“in cloaca,”* which sounds spiritual until you translate it to English: it means “on the toilet.” Now, Luther was unquestionably a man with “issues,” so it’s quite possible that this *was* the actual location. But many scholars believe that he was using a metaphor, popular in the Middle Ages, for “humility” and “humbling oneself.” And if you think about it, it’s a darn good metaphor for humility, for if there is ever a time or place where you are completely humble, it is here. There is no pretense, no facade, no pride, no image management—you are what you are. The toilet is ground zero for humanity. The key to the kingdom is in fact the key to the rest room.

Here, as with all of Jesus’ lessons, we need to proceed carefully. The main point of his teaching was to shock the heart, stimulate a pulse and impart life. The picture Jesus paints of the kingdom of God is not some Disneyworld experience where everyone but Adolf Hitler gets a day pass. It’s a description meant to jolt and shock, which might not be a bad idea for us—what *do* we hunger and thirst for?

Conduct in the Kingdom

The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman

caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

“No one, sir,” she said.

“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.” (John 8:3-11)

In his book *Les Misérables* (it's like the play, only the characters don't sing), Victor Hugo sets up a conflict between his two main characters, Inspector Javert and Jean Valjean, representing the tension between justice and mercy, law and grace. Jean Valjean is an escaped parolee who is given grace, mercy and a small fortune by a kindly bishop; Javert is the legalistic police inspector who can find no rest until he brings Valjean to justice.

This same tension stretches between Jesus and the religious legalists of his day. The Pharisees loved the Law of Moses and arrived at a formula for righteousness yielded by the sum of 248 commandments, 365 prohibitions and more than 1,500 hedge laws (peripheral laws created to keep from even approaching a breach of the real laws). In an administration

where justice and observance of the law are the only values, mercy becomes the greatest evil, and transgressors become hunted fugitives. And so the Pharisees set a trap for Jesus.

The trap, as far as sinister and nefarious plots go, was ingenius. Roman-occupied Israel could not exercise capital punishment, so if Jesus said, “Stone her,” as the Law of Moses demanded for this offense, he was likely to be seized by the Roman militia. If, on the other hand, he said, “Let her go,” then he was guilty of undermining the Mosaic Law, an action that could be used to turn Israel against him. As I said, quite ingenius. The unfortunate woman in this passage was nothing more than bait. Her life, her shame: inconsequential.

Jesus, clearly no stranger to martial arts, used his attackers’ forward momentum against them, flipping the situation and placing *them* in an ethical dilemma: “If I throw the stone, I’ll be saying I’m sinless, which could turn the people against me!” The religious leaders, having been caught in their own trap, dispersed, blank faced and dazed.

Two times during this exchange Jesus stooped to write on the ground with his finger. Theologians have speculated for a couple millennia about what Jesus might have been writing, but concentrating on *what* he wrote misses the point. The important detail is the fact that, as the experts in the Mosaic law interrogated him, he was writing with his finger, echoing this Old Testament verse: “When the LORD finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the Testimony, the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God” (Exodus 31:18). The very finger that had written the Law was now writing on the ground—and being quizzed by the “experts” on the Law’s contents. That’s like asking Bill Gates if he knows what a web browser is.

Clearly, Jesus isn’t disputing the moral content of the Law—that’s not what this is about. Rather he’s challenging a soulless application of it and a legalistic interpretation that misses the heart behind it. The impact

of Jesus' behavior was perhaps intended more for the woman than for her accusers; she broke the law of God but was forgiven by the Lawgiver. And if the author of the law declares you innocent, then whatever your jury decrees is irrelevant.

The story also provides us with the kingdom's code of conduct: that which is expected of its citizens. The kingdom is about grace, first being its recipient and then, in turn, extending grace to others. "If [someone] sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him" (Luke 17:4).

But while the economy of grace is about receiving and giving undeserved mercy for wrongs committed, never changing one's habits pil-lages grace—"Grandma's such a sweet and caring soul—let's empty her bank account." And so Jesus' direction to the woman is "Go now and leave your life of sin." It is called repentance (a change of heart, life, direction), and it is the way kingdom members honor the grace that has been given. They leave behind the habits that led them to the door of grace needing a handout.

Parables: Messengers of the Kingdom

The disciples came to [Jesus] and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?"

He replied, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables:

'Though seeing, they do not see;
though hearing, they do not hear or understand.'

In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:

'You will be ever hearing but never understanding;
you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.

For this people's heart has become calloused;
they hardly hear with their ears,
and they have closed their eyes.

Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
hear with their ears,
understand with their hearts and turn,
and I would heal them.'

But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it. (Matthew 13:1-17)

Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. (Matthew 13:34)

You really can't appreciate a book or a movie without knowing its genre. As soon as I know it's a zombie movie, I know to rate the film based on body count and not acting. Genre is everything. The merit of the phrase "eggs, chili powder, prune juice and Captain Crunch" can only be assessed by learning whether the genre is that of a grocery list, a poem, or a recipe. It's a coherent grocery list, a lousy poem and a vile recipe.

To understand a particular section of the Bible, you simply must identify the genre, for the book as a whole is a quilt of virtually every genre imaginable. The phrase "God is my rock" (Psalm 18:2) is meant as a comforting metaphor but would be a rather disturbing statement of fact—God as igneous sediment. It is a sad reality that a great deal of interpretive error, as well unwarranted criticism of the Bible, stems from a mislabeling or ignorance of its genres.

The Gospels, thankfully, are pretty straightforward, and so the only question facing readers is asked by the disciples: Why parables? Why did Jesus choose this genre, as opposed to a typical sermon outline? Jesus' answer: the genre *is* the message.

A parable is a lot like a poem, so focusing our mental horsepower on understanding the genre of poetry will help us figure out what Jesus was saying through his use of parables. Let's start our education with a few lines of verse, shall we?

Vital spark of heav'nly flame,
Quit, oh, quit, this mortal frame!
Trembling, hoping, ling'ring, flying,
Oh, the pain, the bliss of dying!
Cease, fond Nature, cease thy strife,
And let me languish into life!

Hark! they whisper; Angels say,
Sister Spirit, come away.
What is this absorbs me quite,
Steals my senses, shuts my sight,
Drowns my spirits, draws my breath?
Tell me, my Soul! can this be Death?

As the poem doesn't make me nauseated, psychotic or depressed, we can safely assume that the author isn't Sylvia Plath. It was written by Alexander Pope. I believe the poem in some way relates to God, which makes sense, for God only knows what Pope could mean by "What is this absorbs me quite." As Pope published the poem, it's safe to assume that he wanted us to understand its meaning; so why, then, didn't he make the meaning clearer?

The point of a poem is to both reveal truth and at the same time obfuscate or conceal it from all who would trample it, skateboard over it,

smudge it with oily hands. Like virginity, a poem is garrisoned to the brute, but to the true lover, its petals open. Pope has encrypted his meaning so that only those who have a heart to understand—or “ears to hear,” to use Jesus’ phrase—will decode its meaning. That’s how Pope wanted it. That’s why he chose this genre. That’s the price of admission.

This is antithetical to the media marketing with which we’re daily dosed—sound bites designed to gather the highest possible viewership. Predicated on clarity, frequency, volume, memorability, and bandwidth, they’re the polar opposite of poems, which seek to whittle down the audience to only an attentive few.

Jesus’ response to the disciples’ question, and his explanation for speaking in parables, is similar to the rationale behind a poem. The shocking truth is that Jesus doesn’t want everyone to understand him. Yes, that’s what I said, “Jesus did not want everyone to understand him.” To those who don’t have a heart to know God, his words will not rhyme (that’s a metaphor): they will be meaningless, veiled, trivial, inconsequential or twisted to say something they didn’t mean. But to those whose hearts are open (those who have “ears to hear”), they will recognize not only the meaning of the parable but also the identity of the Messiah, who is himself a parable—truth in a disguise, truth veiled. That’s how Jesus wants it. That’s why he chose this genre. That’s the price of admission.

There is great mercy in the literary vehicle of a parable. During an intervention, family and friends confront a loved one who had entered into some kind of destructive behavior with the truth about his or her life. It’s a dangerous procedure, only to be performed when a person is in the final sequence of self-destruct and there are many within the blast radius. Yet it’s not the procedure itself that’s dangerous. When truth is unveiled so openly, so I’m-putting-my-hands-over-my-ears-so-I-can’t-hear-you-lalala-lala bluntly, you have eliminated the option of neutrality, of denial, of ratio-

nalization. When truth is presented so baldly, all options are narrowed to two, and the hearer must either open their hearts and respond or harden their hearts beyond remedy. An intervention is a last resort.

In cloaking the truth in parables, Jesus allowed for people to be in a process, to be on a spiritual journey, to remain neutral if they chose. The parables are a dog whistle, piercing to the faithful but muted to the masses, graciously allowing the unready to avoid an out-and-out, final confrontation with the truth.

This is what made parables a good genre for the message of the kingdom: a veiled Messiah (the King disguised as a vagrant), a veiled kingdom (a spiritual economy with no pre-existing geopolitical strength), a veiled message (parables instead of commandments).

The King of the Kingdom

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. . . .

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. (John 1:1-2, 14)

Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.”

Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.”

Jesus answered: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’ Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me?” (John 14:6-10)

Kingdom: the concept, and the word itself, is pregnant with the idea of a king. That Jesus viewed himself, and was viewed by his followers, as *that* king is beyond doubt. But, as this is the kingdom of God, who but God could reign over it? Was Jesus claiming to be God?

The Gospels answer that question with an unequivocal “yes”—or “yea, verily,” depending on your translation. A casual reading of the Gospels affirms both Jesus’ claims to deity—“Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father”—as well as his disciples’ apprehension of that fact. The Gospel writers strengthen the case by citing passages from the Old Testament which clearly show the messiah to be of divine nature, passage like this one from Isaiah:

To us a child is born . . . And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6)

And if Jesus’ statements concerning his deity were at times veiled, the message was clearly not lost on his enemies: “ ‘We are not stoning you for any of these,’ replied the Jews, ‘but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God’ ” (John 10:33).

Modern agnosticizing over this claim has sought to rationalize it through the notion that Jesus may have believed in the divinity of all persons. This idea rests on what is most loathed about movies like *Titanic* or *The Kingdom of Heaven*: characters are equipped with modern-day sensibilities and worldviews, and plopped into a revisionist past, immune to the prejudices, values and beliefs of the world the director has made them occupy.

The idea that we are all part of God, and that divinity resides within each of us, is simply not a possible meaning for Jesus’ words and actions. Jesus was a *Jew*; the disciples were *Jews*; they lived in *Israel*. They were not raised watching *Star Wars* and thinking of God as a “Force” or

electrical current, but on the Old Testament, which worshiped a personal God as far above humans as we are above mollusks. To presume that Jesus believed in the divinity of all is to be guilty of our own revisionist history, cramming an enlightened guru Jesus into a time capsule and transporting him back from the New Age and into first-century Israel. To presume this is also to think that the idea of each of us housing a fragment of the parceled-out Almighty is more intellectually sound or takes less faith than trusting in Jesus' self-awareness as the one and only deity. It isn't and it doesn't.

Still others have sought to make peace with Jesus' claim to be God by proposing that it was attributed to him later or developed as a belief over time. But the apostle Paul's letters to the Galatians, Thessalonians, Philippians, and Corinthians can be solidly placed between A.D. 50 and 60, just a couple decades after the death of Christ (around A.D. 30–33), and in those letters we find both Paul's affirmation that Jesus was "in very nature God" (Philippians 2:6) and that what he taught, all the churches believed (Galatians 1:22, 23). In fact, embedded within these letters are creeds that are even older, dating back to just a few years after the death of Jesus, and which affirm the early, and universal, Christian belief in Christ's deity. Take a look at one of the early embedded creeds within Paul's letter to the Colossians:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him. (Colossians 1:15-19)

In *The World's Great Religions*, Huston Smith observes, "Only two

people ever astounded their contemporaries so much that the question they evoked was not ‘Who is he?’ but ‘*What is he?*’ They were Jesus and Buddha. The answers these two gave were exactly the opposite. Buddha said unequivocally that he was a mere man, not a god—almost as if he foresaw later attempts to worship him. Jesus, on the other hand, claimed . . . to be divine.”³

Every now and then something chomps its way up the food chain that is difficult for humans to classify. It’s bizarre, for example, that a whale is classified as a mammal. As I do not possess a spout hole, it’s hard for me to see how we share a connection. At the same time, I can see that a whale isn’t exactly a fish either.

For a religious or moral teacher to claim to be God moves him out of the nice, safe, perhaps even patronizing phylum of religious leader, and it forces us to place him within one of three families: the family of liars (religious leaders who lied about who and what they were), the family of lunatics (religious leaders who actually believed they were God but were not), or the family of God (in this case, the Son of).

In the world of religious leaders, Jesus is often lumped in with other great religious leaders, including Moses, Muhammad, and Buddha. But frankly, he doesn’t fit. On the surface, he looks like a wonderful religious leader who helped shape the world of faith and morals, but his claim to be God makes him a different species altogether.

This is the last, and clearly most challenging, of Jesus’ kingdom teachings: the nature and identity of the King. It is challenging because it puts us in an uncomfortable dilemma, described well by the famed Oxford professor C. S. Lewis:

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or

else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a mad man or something worse.⁴

Aware that such audacious claims would invite skepticism, Jesus asked questions like “Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk?’” (Mark 2:9). Try it yourself: is it easier to make an outrageous claim than to perform an outrageous miracle? “I am the world’s rightful pope.” “I command you, 2004 Ford Windstar, to rise from the driveway.”

I found making the outrageous claim significantly easier, and that, I take it, was Jesus’ point as he proceeded to heal a paralytic and defend his claim to forgive sin. “‘But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.’ . . . He said to the paralytic, ‘I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home’ ” (Mark 2:10, 11).

Jesus was aware that the power and authority that he claimed to possess would need to be demonstrated. As we turn to the miracles of Jesus we’ll see what he did about that.