

# What Would Jesus Like?

Imagine we are having a company dinner at a rustic lodge in Montana. There is an enormous moose head on the wall. Ah, a conversation starter! "That is one BIG moose!" Our newfound friend *also* finds moose to be big. "Don't want to meet HIM in the parking garage!" This can be enough to make us friends for the evening, even if we still know nothing about each other.

Jesus once remarked that people don't really know what to make of him - some say this, some say that! And we still haven't figured Him out. Imagine you are in an art gallery and there is an exhibition of paintings of Jesus. Walk in and you see, in soft pastels, a hearty, smiling young man with an armload of children. But turn a corner, and you are face to face with a vivid rendering, in red and yellow and black, of the Son of Man in the temple, screaming at the crooked moneychangers, driving them out with a whip. Yet another scene shows a pair of demon-possessed men who howl at Him to stay away, but the Master seems to address them as calmly as you or I would talk with a roofing contractor. We also see a God who troubles the ordinary man, or a woman getting water at a well. Then we see a Japanese Jesus, and wonder if their concept of him differs from ours. Then at the end of the hall, we see Jesus beckoning ALL of us - you, me and the nice little old lady next door - to come to him across a chasm of fire which neither Mario nor Luigi nor Evel Knievel himself could hope to leap.

What violence accompanies this gentle Man from Nazareth! It's like a bad dream. We approach the Lord of the Universe, trembling, with our best deeds in our hands, wrapped with a bow. Just as we draw near, we look down and to our shock, the gift we were holding has been transformed into a used diaper. The worst kind, the zoo diaper. It melts, it drips on our fingers and . . . we wake up.

I didn't make that up (except to dramatize it). Isaiah, the prophet, wrote:

*All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we dry up and shrivel like a leaves, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. (Isaiah 64:6)*

Later, Jesus' spokesman, Paul sanitized that concept a bit in writing to the Roman church:

*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23)*

"Nobody's perfect", everyone says. "Good" is not our default setting.

*Jesus loves us, this we know,  
for the Bible tells us so.  
Little ones (us) to Him belong;  
we are weak, but He is strong.*

"We are weak, we are weak - - - we are WEAK!" My three-year-old son got stuck on those three notes, singing the song. I helped him finish the line, then returned to my studies, humbled. "Yes... I am weak. I think I am a big deal because I went to graduate school and learned the magic art of music... but God, I am weak!"

The question "What Would Jesus Like?" demands that we understand what and who Jesus loves. The famous John 3:16 verses say that God loved the world so much that He gave us his only Son - for the purpose of inspiring belief in Him, which brings eternal life. And it goes on to surprise us:

*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*

*Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.*

*Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.*

It's not the classic picture of your sins put on one side of a scale and your good deeds on the other and wham! The sin side hits the table so hard it tosses the good side like a salad. That concept is from Daniel 5:27, and it's about Belshazzar, a king who was about to get de-kinged for being... well, very bad. Jesus' picture of our own lives is more of an either/or thing. You do something bad, and naturally don't want to be found out, so you cover it up. It seems to start with behavior! John 3:16 begins with belief, but quickly shows us that belief and behavior are inseparable.

Pop culture and pop theology do not like this. They send the message that we can just do our own unlovable thing and God will be merciful anyway. "Though it makes Him sad to see the way we liiiiiive, He'll always say, I forgive!" Many of us heard the song "He" on TV - Andy Williams, Diana Ross, Elvis Presley, McGuire Sisters... and wondered. After all, He wept for Jerusalem, but walked into Jerusalem and allowed them to kill him, while he said "Father, forgive them - they don't know what they are doing!" Does it matter what Jesus likes, or not?

I might imagine Jesus as a superhero who has volunteered to watch the bratty kids in the nursery. He likes good behavior; He delights when we share our toys. But kids themselves can twist that praise into the notion that "being good" makes you *better than other people*. From there it goes downhill - friction, ugliness, violence, drugs, death. We don't like it,

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Jesus sure didn't like it. But He was committed to a better way of life. He modeled for us the goodness of God. He exhibited love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faith, humility, and self-control, in front of the world, and privately. But He also confronted the bullies.

What do bullies like? They like other bullies, but are scared to death of good people. Good people are like light bulbs who just by being good, expose badness. So they gang up together with a common purpose in life - to hurt those they fear the most. "Goody two-shoes!" goes the insult. The term "Christian" was originally an insult to describe decent people who tried to be like Jesus in how they lived.

*Jesus liked what is good wherever He found it. In doing so, He painted a target on Himself.*

The rich, religious, and respected, this gang of priests and lawyers, opposed Him, then accused Him, then had Him legally murdered - lynching is what we call it today. They called it a patriotic duty. But even in killing Him they failed! In three days He rose from the grave, walked the earth, physically rose to heaven and then... had us wait a bit to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit - His presence in and among us, saturating our very being!

In the days to followed the Resurrection, though, we see mixed results. Some lived like brand-new people; others clung to the old ways like a precious family heirloom. It seems everybody still wanted to be better than somebody. Truth is, it doesn't work that way. As Syndrome proclaimed, "When everybody is super... the *nobody will be super!*" It was like a replay of Genesis and the Old Testament, where people didn't seem to care what God liked, and they used God only as a prop for a bad movie called "Sinful Nature doing its Thing". Centuries went by, featuring very little that Jesus, or anybody, would like.

Supposing we do start fresh with Jesus! What does He like, so we can produce what He likes? First of all, is He really so good that it matters what he likes?

I suppose if you took a survey, Jesus' name would get high marks beside the word "good." What does this word "good" mean? I think things are good which please me; but is there any exact meaning for this word? I went into the origins and use of the terms "good" and "God", expecting one of them to be derived from the other. I was wrong. The mammoth Century Dictionary of 1897, in its 24 volumes, tries to explain in detail how words get to be words. The language is thick, but it gets right to the point:

*Popular etymology has long derived God from good; but a comparison of the forms ... shows this to be in error. Moreover, the notion of goodness is not conspicuous in the heathen conception of deity, and in good itself the ethical sense is comparatively late.*

Translation: For most of history around the world, "God" is associated with power, and "good" with pleasant things. The word origins are different. The Boy Scout sort of "good" -

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trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent - wasn't used much until recent years. God, on the other hand, does not limit Himself to the terms of a motto for children to recite. But is Jesus = God a true equation?

*The 2020 survey conducted by Ligonier Ministries, a Florida-based Reform Church nonprofit, found 52 percent of U.S. adults say they believe Jesus Christ is not God — a belief that contradicts traditional teachings of the Bible through the Christian church, which state Jesus was both man and God.*

Then half of us look at the Jesus picture and He is God; the other half see just a nice guy, anything from a good storyteller to the CEO of the universe. Was Lucas right? Is the universe yin and yang, half light, half dark, always in conflict, with a Force to help you when things get out of control? The gospel of John gives us powerful assurance that Jesus is God, and light is in His very nature:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and God was the Word. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*

God doesn't need to like us, and we don't need to like God. We may delight in God or at times we may live in terror, but the best thing to do is obey. God exists in real space and time, and carries a big stick. The Bible is like a big lamp that helps us read the labels on the various cans of life, so we will know which ones to open. But the choices are often vexing and complicated. If we avoid all sin, we will have to avoid all humanity, and avoid ourselves!

By those standards, the atheist has it easy. He dismisses the whole thing as superstition. He simply writes God and Jesus or anything supernatural off the ledger, and for lack of anyone better, puts humans on top! I say "he" because male atheists outnumber female two to one.

A lot of these guys are in the education business; but in spite of the best efforts of college philosophy departments (75% atheist) and the governments of two of the biggest nations in the world, Soviet Russia and China, being founded on atheism, still only a tiny percent are fully committed to their doctrine. 30% of atheists *occasionally pray*. They want to believe that there exists an invisible God who loves people. What about Christians?

Well... here's another freaky poll result:

*76% of Americans affirm the "historical existence" of "Jesus of Nazareth," although it's also interesting to note that if 89% of self-identified Christians embraced that statement, the implication is that 11% of them are not sure!*

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One in 10 Christians apparently think believing a good fairy tale is better than believing nothing. Tell you what: let's assume He is real, and read a real conversation between real people in Matthew's gospel, chapter 16. Jesus pops his students a spectacular question:

*One day, on a road headed for the town of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked,*

*"Who do people say that I am?"*

*They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."*

**Ouch. Already people saw Jesus as... (drum roll) - a reincarnated DEAD person! (cymbal)**

*"But what about you?" He asked. "Who do YOU say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." I can picture the Nazarene making a grand pause, then softly whispering,*

*"Shhh... don't tell a soul."*

All right! Jesus affirmed he was the "Messiah", the person who was going to make good good and bad bad again! Did He succeed?

*84% of participants in a new "Jesus in America" study -- conducted by the global Ipsos research company for the Episcopal Church -- agreed that "Jesus was an important spiritual figure." The bad news? While 50% of "not religious" Americans accepted this "important spiritual figure" language, they were much less impressed with the believers who represent Jesus.*

*When asked, "What characteristics do you associate with Christians in general?" the nonreligious selected these words from the poll's options -- "hypocritical" (55%), "judgmental" (54%) and "self-righteous" (50%). Next up: "arrogant," "unforgiving" and "disrespectful."*

So a hefty number of atheists might rethink the whole thing - but Christians are standing in their way.

To be fair, we must understand that hypocrisy, judgmentality and self-righteousness are equal-opportunity sins, not limited to Christians! No human being says "I am proud to be a hypocrite; I relish being a double-dealer!" Jesus didn't like the stuff, nor should we. But our attachment to Jesus links us to a sinless Son of God - certainly *some of Jesus* must have rubbed off! Even a little bit?

*I cite all of this because it is senseless to worry about what somebody likes if the person never existed; and if the person did exist, then it is foolish to do the opposite of what that person taught.*

Okay, okay, let's assume Jesus wasn't a phony, and He didn't like phonies. So what DOES Jesus like? You've been waiting for a list, haven't you? Here's mine:

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Jesus likes *natural beauty* - he compares an ordinary field lily to the robes of a great king, and the lily wins the prize.

He likes *spunk* - Nathaniel snickered privately about Jesus' coming from a no-account village; Jesus knew what he had said - and told him He enjoyed such forthrightness!

He likes *food* - maybe He started with a forty-day fast, and seemed to get along on nothing at times, but he also enjoyed the company of eaters and drinkers. He was quite happy for his students to fix supper, openly, out in the field, on a day when it was illegal to prepare food.

He *likes sharing*. At least twice, he held big teaching seminars out in the wilderness. When food ran out, He multiplied a few little fish and some bread into a banquet, for thousands of families. He pictures our reunion in heaven as yet another feast.

He likes *faith*. He found inventive faith in a Roman military leader. Up to that time, everyone who learned that Jesus could heal, they brought sick friends to him. But the Roman said, "When I give orders, the orders are good anywhere. Just give an order, sir, and it will be done!" And that's exactly what Jesus did.

He likes *friendship*. I paraphrase what Matthew wrote from the Last Supper, Jesus speaking:

*To me, you are not servants any more. Not "students". You are my friends. Servants don't really know their masters, but friends share everything."*

He likes *devotion* - a woman opened a jar of expensive perfume and poured out the whole thing on His feet, wiping them down with her own tears. Jesus shamed those who criticized this, telling them that the woman would be world-famous for doing this. Her story would be told forever!

He enjoyed *tweaking social standards for a good purpose*. A non-Jewish woman came to Jesus wanting her son to be healed. He teased her to her limit - not to be mean, but for the benefit of the crowd that was always nearby. Listen to this! "*It is not right to give the children's bread to the dogs.*" She did not back away! Instead, she argued that even dogs eat the scraps from the Master's table. Breaking social mores was a Jesus specialty. He exclaimed over her faith, and immediately healed the son.

He liked those who *creatively make good things happen*. Some folks broke open a roof so they can lower in a crippled man for healing.

Sure, He *didn't* like King Herod. Who did? - Jesus called him a "fox", which did not mean a cute little storybook fuzzy animal, but a deadly predator. He called high-ranking religious

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leaders "snakes", for their hypocrisies. "Foxes and snakes, hypocritical fakes, tweaking the nose and nipping the toes of the Son of God incarnate."

Jesus of Nazareth had *confidence* in people. With His own students, he maintained a complex, professional relationship infused with love. Often he was pained by their lack of understanding, yet he had confidence in them enough to trust them with reaching the world with the kingdom of God - for he planted in them the notion that something is even better than "like", and that is Love.

More likes: Jesus had *fun*. He liked people. We find Him on the beach, watching his students trying to fish, and catching nothing. They were only the length of a football field out in the water, but they did not recognize him, likely being more involved with the fish. He shouted out for them to toss their net on the other side of the boat - a rather silly sort of thing to do - and lo and behold, it was full of fish! And John knew it was the Lord, and Peter dove into the sea and began trying to tow this fish-filled boat to shore, where - get this - Jesus had fish *already frying*. Nobody had to wait to cut and clean. Did He say "here, fishy-fishy? I have no idea how he created this barbecue. He simply liked people, and must have enjoyed creating a feast.

Jesus liked making sure relationships are true. Once on shore, Jesus had a little talk with Peter, the one who had disowned his Lord when things were really dangerous. "Do you love me?" asked the Lord of sea, sky and soul. "Sure, you're my buddy", answered Peter. Three times, same answer. Yet He stayed by this deeply embarrassed Peter, and within fifty days we find the Holy Spirit filling Peter and a hundred twenty others, and then thousands more by nightfall, beginning the transformation of the world.

Jesus had *confidence in us!* His promises are still valid, and his kingdom of love will grow as we do. I read the newspapers about sports. When a team falters - even when it doing well but not winning the championship! - angry fans want a new manager, a new shortstop - good grief, a new stadium! And the anger gets grimmer in politics of any sort. Throw the bum out! A new broom sweeps clean!

I watched my wife sweep a mess of leaves perfectly clean with an old corn broom bent curly from years of use. She doesn't always pine for some new machine, but uses what she has with confidence and grace. How much more we can build up our friends with trust.

"You are My friends", says Jesus - "if you do whatever I command you." WHOA. Is this Jesus some sort of authoritarian military general who equates friendship with obedience? Is He a Mafia chief? or maybe Saruman? Wait a second. There's more to it - the Lord explains the commandment:

*"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."*

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We like, and we love.

Do we understand the difference between "like" and "love"? Ask a teenager who is in love. That young person will wait until just the right moment to say "I love you." They must feel a guarantee that they will be understood, so the right word is a crucial choice. Until then, it's "like" and "enjoy." They are examining themselves to learn if they are really in love, or only feeling goosey-bumps. In the fullness of time, God gave us Jesus.

The Gospels emphasize Jesus' love in His actions - his defense of the weak, his going beneath the surface to find the heart of a matter. Do you let Him go deeper than "like"? God loved the world so much, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish, but have everlasting life.

Amen.