

# “Misquoting Jesus”

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How do you listen to Jesus? How do you interpret what he says to you? How do you quote back to yourself, & others, what it is you've heard from Jesus?

In some ways, the process we go through may very much be like the children's game-‘telephone’- where one phrase is whispered into one child's ear at the beginning of a line, only to become watered-down, garbled, & misconstrued by the time it reaches the end of the line. Perhaps it happens in a well-intentioned and innocent way.

Our youngest daughter Emma, now nearly four, once shared a moment like this. After she was looking at the Maryland state flag for some time, she asked, “What is that?” When she was told it was the flag of the state we live in, she replied, “I know a song for that!” Surprised, we asked her to sing the song. What we heard next were the words and the tune for “Mary had a little lamb.” (Mary-lamb, get it? ... Out of the mouths of babes ... ) That was more than cute ... and very understandable. We really didn't expect Emma to start singing “Maryland, my Maryland.” (Though I would imagine that there are plenty of near four-year-olds out there - who are steeped in all the good tradition of the Free State, and who would know all the words - and well.) Yet we're older than four - and we don't have such good excuses for misquoting; it doesn't come off quite as cute, either.

So let me ask again - how do you listen to Jesus? How do you interpret what he says to you? How do you quote back to yourself, & others, what it is you've heard from Jesus?

Let me approach these questions in three steps, according to a rough outline N.T. Wright gives us in his chapters titled *The Book God Breathed* and *The Story and the Task*.

What we need to do is to go over the book we use; find out who the key to this story really is, and then see how it is we understand, embody, and live with and within this holy & everlasting story.

The Bible itself is a huge, sprawling book. In order to envision it, you could conjure up the image of an enormous mural: if you painted all the figures life-size, you'd need most of the Great Wall of China to display it. Picking it up, you need to remind yourself that you hold in your hands not only the most famous book in the world, but also one that has extraordinary power to change lives, to change communities, to change the world. It has done it before. It can do it again.

But surely, you say, only God gets to change the world like that - how can it be said that a mere *book* can do such a thing? Simply put; it's not easy, and of course it's not the book that does it on it's own- like some kind of magic. One of the best images I've found to describe the message of how it is that scripture works with us & within us; as well as how it can sometimes go awry comes from the pastor & author

Brian McLaren, in his book *A Generous Orthodoxy*. He explains it like this: “At our best moments, we enjoy Scripture and are enlivened by it is as with the effortless joy of riding a bicycle, where our *momentum in faithful living* means that we don’t need to think about balancing at all. We enjoy the exhilaration of speed and wind and scenery too much to be self-conscious. Between our best and worst moments, though, we’re like a beginner bicycle rider who has to continually be self-conscious about balance, nearly to the exclusion of everything else: ‘am I leaning too far to the left, too far to the right?’”

At our **worst** moments, we give up riding altogether and spend our time critiquing other riders - *he leans too far too the left; she leans too far to the right*, and so on.

So when we’re living faithfully - in sync with what we know in our bones God wants us to be doing, we probably can’t explain how we do it as well as we just do it - because it’s a matter of feel, of instinct. Our explanation seems a lot clumsier than our riding.

Just as it’s nearly impossible to balance a bicycle when it’s not moving, we’re most likely to crash in our dealing with Scripture if we’re not moving forward in living faithfully. Perhaps the best way to use scripture is not to concentrate on our use of scripture per se, but rather to focus on our pursuit of a faithful life.

In other words, we miss the mark, or ‘misquote Jesus’ most simply and most often when we don’t do what he asks us to do; we fall blame to sins of omission more readily than to sins of commission. And it’s not just in what we don’t do that we miss the mark; as much as anything, it’s a matter of how it is we hear & understand what it is the Bible tells us to do. It has been said that there are just as many battles about the Bible these days as there are battles within its pages. And some of them are for the same reason. Sibling rivalries, and rivalries of all sorts; from Cain and Abel to the two brothers in Jesus’ story of the prodigal son, and now to the many varieties of Christianity in the world, each with its own way of reading the Bible. Each finds itself nourished and sustained by that reading. Each at least attempts to put into practice the lessons it learns, based on the life, teachings and example of the one who is believed literally to be God incarnate- Jesus of Nazareth.

So, who is it in the first place that we are supposed to be listening to; who is this Jesus, to begin with? Very briefly- he is much more than we make him out to be. Two images must suffice for now. One comes from Huston Smith, a renowned scholar of world religions. In a discussion about the place of Jesus within Islam, he outlines some very important yet I’d guess virtually unknown aspects concerning the place of Jesus of Nazareth in the context of Islam. These facts are not widely known but true. The Koran clearly affirms Jesus’ virgin birth. The Koran also endorses Jesus’ Second Coming.

Islam credits Jesus as a greater wonder-worker than Muhammad, and it ranks his sanctity above Muhammad’s. This means that while Muhammad is last in line as a prophet, Jesus, who preceded him (by 600 years), is recognized both as a seal of sanctity and a seal of the Ages (explained as one who is to be venerated-and revered at all times.)

There are more sayings attributed to Jesus in Arabic than in any other language (many of them apocryphal - after the fact of the gospels being written.) And Muslims never mention Jesus without adding, "May peace be upon him,"(just as that honor is accorded to Muhammad- the prophet.) This is all to say that in more ways than we know- Jesus is huge, personal and influential; in more contexts and with more faces than we could ever imagine.

Here's the second image, perhaps one that might meet you closer to home. This past week I've heard Joyce recount portions of her recent trip to Scotland - she just got back from her whirlwind trip last Sunday night. Part of the trip turned out to be tracing her ancestry, visiting the ancient battlefield of Glencoe, and reflecting on whether or not any of her long-lost relations are buried there. As part Scots-Irish, I can relate to that; maybe some of you can too. In any case, it's the image of our forbearers that I want to evoke now. And I wonder what impact having some words directly from your ancestors would have on you.

What words would you want from them, if you had them; say, a letter from your great-great-grandfather - written on the boat on the way across the Atlantic, or penned to a long-forgotten relative as a message to be read & treasured while over here in the new world.

What authority would you give to it, what weight would you put on it, how would you regard it as a legacy of wisdom from the past for life in the present?

Well, it's not too hard to take the next step to see that we do have words given to us, meant for all of us, passed along generation to generation, that come from one who is deeply related to us. The words of Jesus, recorded by the gospel writer Luke, are words shared with love and caring, full of great hopes and expectations that we will hear these words, and heed them, too. They are not easy words to follow, but they are true. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you. Do good and lend, expecting nothing in return. Do not judge, and you will not be judged, do not condemn, and you will not be condemned yourselves." These are powerful words, words that are part of our legacy & heritage as followers of Jesus. They are words that follow the Spirit of our Living Lord, even though we, and our forbearers, have seldom lived up to them. They are words we don't quote as often as we might, for fear of our own hypocrisy; but they are all the more important for the truth they point to.

This brings us, finally, to how we live with and within the story the Bible brings us; how we understand and embody this story in our own lives.

Franz Kafka, the existentialist novelist, once shrewdly noted, "In your struggle with the world, be sure to bet on the world." As one who trusts in Jesus Christ for life here and now, and forever after - I disagree. Even when it gets very hard; when we feel caught between a rock & a hard place, when we hear ourselves sounding hypocritical, I bet on Jesus over against the world, and I trust you do too.

It may not seem to be very practical, not in the sense of getting ahead in the world or even in doing what comes naturally.

It might only become possible through the power of God- and not our own human will. But it only becomes possible in the first place when we know who it is we're looking to in faith, and what is being said to us.

There's a paradox at work here between who it is who calls us to follow and who it is we are. Whether or not we can live up to all that Jesus calls us to be is not the 'be all and end all' of who we are. We're no different from Jesus' first disciples, who stumbled along their way, trying to understand and to follow him. But I've always envisioned that Jesus is out there ahead of us on the journey of life, encouraging us from up ahead - not behind us, pushing us forward. And as Jesus is ahead of us, he's there not to belittle or berate us, not to disparage or discourage us, but to inspire, lift up, encourage & support us. Jesus' words may not be as practical as we'd like, but so it is with the power of love that cannot be compromised.

Listening to Jesus, interpreting what he says & responding to what comes to us in life will raise for us enough questions and desires for something more that we can't help but be drawn- sometimes despite ourselves- to the way of truth shown in Jesus. The church has always believed that we can't really love one another unless our love is a redirection of our love for God. And the church has also always believed that there is no love of God that is not shown, somehow, in and through the ordinary relationships of life.

What we say about Jesus to ourselves as well as to others makes a difference. Our words are a pathway on which our faith goes forth into the world, as followers of the One who embodies ultimate faith and the reason for any hope at all.

So may what we have to say, and may what we accomplish in our lives be for God's glory, as we faithfully follow, the best that we can. Thanks be to God. Amen.