WAITING FOR CHRISTMAS

REFLECTIONS ON ADVENT

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MenOfIntegrity.net
What Is Jesus Like?

Every semester Scot McKnight, professor of religious studies at North Park University in Chicago, gives his students a test on the first day of his class. The test begins with a series of questions about what the students think Jesus is like. Is he moody? Does he get nervous? Is he the life of the party or an introvert? The 24 questions are then followed by a second set—with slightly altered language—in which the students answer questions about their own personalities.

McKnight is not the only one who has administered this exam; it has been field tested by other professionals as well. But the results are remarkably consistent—everyone thinks Jesus is just like them. McKnight added, "The test results also suggest that, even though we like to think we are becoming more like Jesus, the reverse is probably more the case: we try to make Jesus like ourselves." McKnight’s personality questionnaire confirms what the French philosopher Voltaire said three centuries ago: "If God has made us in his image, we have returned him the favor."

PRAYER FOR THE WEEK

Jesus, help me to look past my confining cultural lens and see you as you really are.
What most [Americans] hold in common is a consumer worldview. Consumerism is a supremely narcissistic worldview in which everything’s value is determined by its usefulness to me. I stand at the center while everything and everyone orbits around me.

Consider the way we shop. Little, if any, thought is given to the story behind a product, the people who made it, or the lives it affects. We act as if the item appeared magically on the shelf simply for our use, and when it is no longer useful we are justified in throwing it away and buying a new one. This same mindset can be applied to people. When a marriage is no longer satisfying my desires, I can end it and try a new one. When a church community is no longer meeting my needs, I will attend a different one. And the fact that there are more men, women, and children in slavery today than at any other time in history—approximately 27 million—shows the tragic impact of this self-centered mindset on the most vulnerable. Horrors like slavery, sex-trafficking, abortion, euthanasia, and genocide are only possible when people are seen as commodities—measured by their usefulness and not by their inherent worth.

—Skye Jethani in With

KEY BIBLE VERSE

Do you know where your fights and arguments come from? They come from the selfish desires that war within you.

JAMES 4:1, NCV

DIG DEEPER

JAMES 4:1-6

MY RESPONSE

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Divine Distraction

Rather than removing our fears and pains, consumerism tries to distract us from them. Goods and experiences are used to keep us amused—anesthetizing us from the unpleasant realities of our existence. Neil Postman explored this phenomenon at length in his influential book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Amusement, he reminds us, literally means “to not think,” in other words, to be distracted. “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.”

When we absorb this cultural value into our faith, God can be reduced to an instrument of amusement. He, or his church, supplies us with the means of distracting ourselves from our pains and fears. We seek worship experiences every week to soothe the struggles we are having at work or home. And we pray for God’s material blessings that will make our lives more enjoyable or comfortable. Rather than helping us experience the joys, sorrows, victories, and defeats of life more acutely and from a higher point of view, a great deal of contemporary religion is designed to help us just get along, to make us more comfortable on the journey, and perhaps to keep us entertained with music and merchandise designed to be “safe for the whole family.”

—Skye Jethani in *With*

A great deal of contemporary religion is designed to help us just get along.

KEY BIBLE VERSE

That’s why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:10

DIG DEEPER

2 CORINTHIANS 12:7–10

MY RESPONSE


Although no one enjoys feeling pain or fear, they play a vital role in our existence. Physically they help us stay alive in our dangerous world, and spiritually they awaken our souls to seek a beauty, a justice, and a freedom beyond what this present world can provide. In our comfort we forget the One who alone can deliver us from our true ailment.

This is certainly not a new temptation. Long before the propagation of consumer capitalism, God warned his ancient people about the dangers of comfort. While slaves in Egypt the people cried out to God for deliverance. They sought after him, and he heard their cries. As he led them to freedom in a good and fruitful land, the Lord repeatedly cautioned them not to forget him once they were comfortable.

But again and again Israel turned away from God in times of prosperity and peace. They became enamored with his good gifts, and these comforts distracted the people from seeking God himself. As their connection to God was reduced to one of seeking material blessing, they became spiritual lepers—unable to feel the pains and fears of life that had led their ancestors to seek God while slaves in Egypt.

—Skye Jethani in *With*
Gifts or God?

Jesus taught, “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” This incredible statement strikes right at our inclination to make a good thing, such as family, into an ultimate thing. Jesus knows how easily we can twist one of God’s good gifts into an ultimate desire. It can take a place he alone is worthy to hold in our lives.

And yet so much of contemporary religion is focused on God’s gifts rather than on God. We use God as a means of building or repairing our families; we use him as a sex therapist; he is our political adviser and our financial planner. From God’s hand we seek family, sex, power, and wealth—but do we actually want God himself? We shouldn’t be surprised to find that when we fixate on what we can attain from God, we fail to experience the peace of his presence in our lives.

When we look at God, we may see a reflection of our consumer selves—a divine vending machine to dispense our desires. But when God looks at us, he sees his child, created in his image, who is wholly and dearly loved.

—Skye Jethani in With Gifts or God?
Seeing God Clearly

Life with God is so far beyond our imagination that it must be revealed to us. A light beyond ourselves must be turned on so that we can begin to see. And this is precisely what occurred when God took on flesh and made his dwelling among us.

The advent of Jesus Christ is what sets Christianity apart from other religions. We affirm that Christ is indeed Immanuel, God with us, and that in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. He is the image of the invisible God. An entirely different way of relating to God is revealed to us. Rather than stumbling in the darkness between forms of religion that are each a variation of fear and control, through Christ the lights are turned on and our attention is drawn to an entirely different vision—Life with God. Our humanly devised ways of relating to God that never seem to satisfy are revealed to be out of joint. But in Christ things suddenly snap in to place, and the result is joy.

Life with God is different [from consumerism] because its goal is not to use God, its goal is God.

—Skye Jethani in With

Weekend Bible Study

STUDY PASSAGE MATTHEW 6:19–24

1. In what ways can you store up treasure in heaven?
2. Why do you think verses 22 and 23 show up here?
3. What are you tempted to place before your relationship with God?

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