

## LESSONS FROM THE LAST WEEK: THE HUMANITY OF JESUS

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**Text: Luke 2:52** –“And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.”

**Introduction:** When I was first exposed to Christianity back in East St. Louis, IL through the ministry of the FBC, Washington Park, the one thing that I was taught about Jesus and that I held to dearly was **His divinity**. I was taught that Jesus was the Son of God, and that He taught and did things that only a divine person could do. One important element of this was that Jesus was **different** than us, and that this made Him unique and able to do all of the things that He did on our behalf. And, **I still hold to the divinity of Jesus** today. Unequivocally!

But during my graduate school days at Baylor University while taking a number of courses in church history, I became more aware of the fact that many individuals and groups also stressed the humanity of Jesus, including the early church which spent several centuries trying to figure out Who Jesus really was. In the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, debates over the relationship of the humanity and divinity of Jesus resulted in the famous **Chalcedonian creed** (a composite of decisions at four ecumenical or general councils: Nicea - 325; I Constantinople - 381; Ephesus - 431; and finally Chalcedon - 451) that concluded that Jesus was “fully god, fully man, one person, two natures.” That’s a nice theological formula, which is easy to believe and hard to dissect!

In one of the shocking revelations on my journey, I began to see in the teachings of liberalism at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a good case for the human side of Jesus. I found that such a teaching on the humanity of Jesus was rooted deeply in the teachings of the New Testament, in the theological statements in the early debates in Christianity, and at varying periods through the history of the church.

A few weeks ago, as I was plotting out the preaching schedule for the Lenten season February and I was trying to figure out what to do on today and to lead up to the Passion Week and then culminate on Easter Sunday. I was also in the process of putting together another dramatic reading in order to examine the Passion Week. I was looking at a lot of different characters, and as I looked at the **stories in the Gospels** relating to the last week in the ministry of Jesus, I suddenly was **genuinely impressed with the humanity of Jesus**. Story after story, character after character, confronted me and us not with the divinity of Jesus but with His humanity. I realized that I find great comfort in the conviction that **Jesus truly identified with us**, that **He was one of us fully and completely**, and that this fact gives **credibility to the Gospel message in a very special way**. In fact, Marcus Borg, a contemporary theologian, has insightfully pointed out that the only title which Jesus used for himself was the “Son of Man.”

So this morning, I want us to **look at some of the events in the last week of Jesus that demonstrate His humanity**, and to try and **understand what that means for those of us who are fellow sojourners here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**. In so doing, I hope that we will have a **deeper understanding of the identification that Jesus has with all of us**, each of us, as we **try to understand, deal with, and elevate our own humanity**.

### **I. Events:**

**A. Entry into Jerusalem – a lesson in the humility of Jesus:** By now, Jesus has developed a reputation and a rather large following. People are looking to Him for hope, for guidance, for direction. Many have heard of his anticipated arrival into the ancient city and have gathered to observe and anticipate. All of this could have gone to His head. He could have

seized the moment and arrived in an arrogant and a pompous manner. He could have dressed like a king, a soldier, or even a priestly figure. But he did not. He **entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey, a symbol of humility** – boy, could we all use a dose of humility.

Ministers, politicians, athletes, you name them, too often convey a very arrogant attitude, which says "Look at me, bow down to me, praise me." There is nothing wrong with success and achievement. But humility is a vanishing virtue. And most of us know that without the grace of God and the encouragement and support of others, we would not be where we are.

**B. *Cleansing the Temple – a lesson in prophetic and righteous indignation, or controlled anger:*** Jesus made several trips to the Temple in Jerusalem during His last week. Early on He used a whip, driving out the greedy moneychangers and sellers of sacrificial animals. His actions condemn the corrupt religious and political system in place in Judea. He demonstrates **anger, passion, and righteous indignation** – sometimes I think that we have become **so pacified that we fail to respond with controlled anger to the hypocrisy, the injustice, the abuse that takes place in our society and world** – politicians; preachers; businesses (advertisements)

What is the one thing in our culture and world that gets you upset more than anything else? And how do you respond? Silence, inward frustration, outward anger, or maybe a controlled anger that expresses a higher ideal?

**C. *Interrogators – a lesson in the importance of knowledge and intelligence, and meaningful dialogue and wisdom: Jesus engaged in debate***, confrontation during the last week, as he was confronted with and challenged by those seeking to entrap Him on **confrontational issues of His day** – Jesus demonstrated the **importance of depth and understanding of one's faith**. **Shallowness** is not a virtue of believers. Too often, Christians simply use their **emotions** to respond to attacks, challenges, confrontation, and **neglect to do the homework** necessary to respond intelligently and forcefully to such issues.

Remember that Luke told us that ***Jesus grew up, matured in wisdom!*** Jesus did not simply display a desire to win a debate, to out argue the opponent. He genuinely tried to take his interrogators to a higher level, to a better, cleaner, more mature understanding. In so doing he responded to questions from the Sanhedrin, the Sadducees, the Pharisees and the Herodians, and to a lawyer. And, He asked his own question to all of them concerning their understanding of the Messiah.

**D. *The widow's mite – a lesson in compassion and true values:*** compassion, sensitivity, seeing the good in the person, not the amount of the offering. In this story Jesus taught us to understand people where they are, observe their positives, their strengths, and the contributions which they make.

**E. *Last Supper – a lesson in friendship and fellowship, and the need for one another:*** need for **fellowship, friendship; empathy toward Peter** – there is a genuine need for camaraderie in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, for fellowship, for a sense of belonging – a need for the church. These are all human needs.

**F. *Garden of Gethsemane – a lesson in the importance of doubt and questioning in our journey: struggle, inner dialogue, need for fellowship with the Father***. Decision making in a challenging situation – doubt, inward struggle, and turmoil are not necessarily signs of weakness - we are better off going through struggle and self reflection when we face serious challenges.

**G. *Arrest, trial and crucifixion – a lesson in passive resistance and vicarious suffering in order to accomplish a greater purpose:*** no turning back; angry mob - **passive resistance**, resulted in arrest, trial, execution; yet the end result was a higher standard, a better way, lasting change for the good in the world. Examples – Jesus, MLK

**H. *Trial before Annas, Caiaphas, the high priest and the Sanhedrin, Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator – a lesson in***

I. *Physical and emotional abuse – a lesson in vicarious suffering as a means for victory:* – sometimes we are tested; so was Jesus – vicarious suffering – for the cause, the benefit of others

J. *Crucifixion/Burial – a lesson in hope during the greatest moment of despair:*

## II. What this all means to 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians:

A. The *emphasis on the humanity of Jesus does not diminish* who He is. It seems that too often Christians are timid in recognizing the humanity of Jesus. We are afraid that it might diminish the case that we make for following Him, that we might see him simply as a great teacher, a good example or model to follow, but not having any quality of the divine.

I propose that *we sacrifice nothing in terms of the divinity of Jesus by balancing it with a focus on His humanity*. I look at the *witness of the early followers of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament*. They were not trying to figure out a reasonable, rationale understanding of His person or nature. On the one hand they looked at Him, at His life, at His teachings, at His conduct, at His willingness to suffer vicariously for them and all others, and they concluded “*He was truly the Son of God.*” This they *observed*, this they *believed*.

They also had walked with Him, broken bread together with Him, faced life’s daily challenges with Him, and they surmised that He was *truly “the Son of Man.”* They didn’t debate the issue, they didn’t try to mathematically figure this out (100% God, 100% man; wait that’s 200%; but that means part God, part man.” They simply reported and believed that which they observed and left it to later generations to try and theologically sort all of this out.

B. His humanity *elevates our humanity*. As I look at this last week in the life and ministry of Jesus, I have reached the conclusion that by understanding His humanity doesn’t diminish Who He is by stressing that He was truly one of us. *In the end, it may not be about Him but rather about us!*

1. *His life demonstrates what we can be and become.* His example *elevates the challenge for who we should be, what we can attain, what we can become*. It raises the standard or the bar on our own humanity.

- a. The humanity of Jesus *teaches us by word and deed* what we can be in terms of *humility*;
- b. a *passion for honesty and justice and righteousness*;
- c. a commitment to *growing in understanding, intelligence, and wisdom*;
- d. a depth of recognizing true value and *expressing genuine compassion for others*;
- e. the reality that *we are not alone*, that *we need not only God but that we truly need each other*;
- f. the recognition that *passive resistance* in the end breaks down violence, barriers, and divisiveness;
- g. the importance of *vicarious suffering* for the cause of others and for the demonstration of the importance of good in our lives;
- h. and the hope that *in the end what seems to be failure can very often result in success at the highest level*.

**Conclusions:** Today, let us be *reminded of the humanity of Jesus*, let us be *aware that His humanity elevates our own humanity* if we can apply that which we have learned, understood, and practiced in our own lives.