

## Four Attitudes Toward Jesus

by W. E. Sangster

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The historian says that Oliver Cromwell was either hated or loved. He was so strong a personality that he could not be ignored. Almost against their will he forced people to take up a forthright attitude toward him.

That is by no means peculiar to Cromwell. In its degree it is true of every strong personality (including a man like President Franklin D. Roosevelt in our own era), and it is true of Jesus in a striking degree. People find it impossible to be indifferent to Him. They might accept Him or reject Him; they might bless Him or curse Him; they might swear by Him or swear at Him. What they cannot do is neglect Him. There was that in Jesus which could not be ignored.

Indeed, it is possible to group the men and women with whom Jesus came into contact, according to the attitude they adopted toward Him. They fall into three classes.

There were, first, His enemies. Drawn chiefly from the upper and professional classes, they said, "He has a demon." They said also, "He has a devil—and is mad." They said, "This man blasphemes." They said also, "Behold, a gluttonous man and a wine-bibber!" They hated Him. "He is a friend and agent of the devil," they said.

The second group was not less definite in its opinion. They said, "He is a good man." The suggestion that He was anything more than a man, they would have set aside as fanciful and absurd. Nonetheless, they insisted on His goodness. The bereaved are consoled; the sick are cheered; the lonely find a friend; the poor have good tidings preached to them. This is evidence they cannot gainsay. To all the insinuations of His enemies they turn a deaf ear. "No!" they say. "No! He is a good man."

The third group find its voice in Peter. It is a declaration born of experience and thought. It is the outcome of intimate contact and deep brooding. Doubtless, it was a profounder

statement than Peter himself perceived in the moment of its utterance. “You are the Christ,” he said, “the Son of the living God.”

So we have an ascending scale. “He has a demon.” “He is a good man.” “He is the Christ.” Very simply, I want to thread my way along that upward path. I do not travel as a systematic theologian seeking the deep abstraction, nor yet as an encyclopedist, covetous of every scrap of evidence. I travel as a simple wayfaring man, pondering the reasons a wayfarer may. Frankly, I want to stand with Peter—or climb yet higher and say with Thomas, “My Lord and my God.”

I cannot pretend to be unbiased or to set out on this quest without a particular hope in my heart. I live in a dark world. If I can be sure of Jesus, who He was and what He said, I can go forward unafraid. If I can be certain of Him, I will dread nothing. Walk at my side now. Let us be sure what we think of Jesus Christ.

### **1. I WILL BEGIN WITH THOSE WHO SAY, “HE HAS A DEMON.”**

It is hard to believe that people ever accused Jesus of complicity with the devil. It is not hard to believe that they thought Him mad. The modern world has grave doubts still of His sanity. It is not hard to believe that they suspected Him, on one occasion at least, of blasphemy; the orthodox Jew would be shocked at anybody who claimed to forgive sin.

But is hard to believe that humans ever accused Jesus of being in league with the devil or of having a set determination to be vile. Only bitter hatred could have brought them to that.

To begin with, there was the evidence of His blameless life. “He went about doing good.” He was free from crude ambition, exhibitionism, and common self-seeking. His chief interests were clearly spiritual. His sublime teaching about God and His uncanny knowledge of the human heart, both tell of a soul of the rarest quality. His own fierce condemnation of sin is burning in its intensity.

All this must have been clear to any discerning and unprejudiced man who met Him in the days of His flesh.

Nor does the evidence end there. From the hundred other reasons that we could employ for rejecting this base slander, I will select one.

It is freely allowed that no man is a hero of his close personal attendants. The world may speak of him in superlative terms, but the servant who sees him at all odd hours—at night when he is overtired, in the morning before he is properly awake, when

business over presses, when disappointment comes, when he is off guard and under no temptation to pose—this man does not normally think of his master as a hero. He knows the other side.

It is easily possible to know too much about some people. I remember from my college days that the head gardener never came to the college chapel when a student was planned to preach. He said, half in jest and half in earnest, “I know ’em; I grow ’em. I’m like the man who works at a jam factory; he has no taste for jam.”

But who were the first to claim that Jesus was sinless, and used of Him the awesome name of “God”? It was the disciples! These were the men who had shared every kind of experience with Him that mortals could share. They were men who had seen Him at all hours of day and night, who had seen Him tired, hungry, disappointed, scorned, abused, and hunted to death, who had ridden with Him on a wave of popularity, and hidden with Him from inquisitive miracle mongers, who had met Him when He came down from a sleepless night of prayer on the hillside, and known Him when He was physically overworked and emotionally overwrought. These were the men—eleven of them—who, with amazing unanimity, declared Him to be the sinless One.

It is an extraordinary testimony. To any unbiased mind, their testimony makes the charge of His enemies utterly false. No thinking man can doubt the quality of Christ’s character—whatever theory he may hold as to His person—if he gives attentive heed to the unanimous testimony of the men who knew Him best.

## **2. WE MOVE ON TO THE GROUP WHO SAY, “HE IS A GOOD MAN.”**

This is a perfectly understandable position. It is held by thousands of thoughtful people today. It is an attitude of mind which claims to be unprejudiced, to recognize facts, and is yet cautious in inference. “He is a good man,” they say, “So much must be admitted. It cannot, indeed, be denied. But nothing more need be added. Leave it at that.”

Well, if it is admitted that Jesus is a good man—and we found it impossible to resist the inference—it will also be admitted, I think, that every good man has a sense of guilt. The better the man, the keener is his sense of guilt. Good John Bunyan was so troubled about his sin, that he wept and trembled and spent the nights, he tells us, “in sighs and tears.” John Wesley, analyzing his experience prior to his conversion (and he had always lived, you remember, an exemplary life), says that he was in a “vile abject state of bondage to sin.” The Apostle Paul uses language stronger still. He says, “**I am the chief of sinners. I know that in me dwells no good thing.**” These men must not be understood as romancers; nor are they guilty of the “devil’s darling sin”—the pride that apes humility. They were utterly sincere in these expressions of inward sin, even though, in their day, they might have passed as models of probity. It is, in short, an infallible

mark of a good man, that he has a keen sense of guilt. If we knew a man who, on our slight acquaintance, had impressed us as being a good man, and we hear him assert that he was without sin, we should be inclined, on that single fact alone, to revise our judgment of him.

Now, it is just here that another aspect of the uniqueness of Jesus emerges again. He was, by the unanimous testimony of most intimate witnesses, a good man, and yet He had no sense of guile. Publicly He made the challenge, “Who of you convinces me of sin?”—and there was none to answer. Not only were His intimates unable to discover sin in Him; He had no awareness of it Himself. He lived intimately with His Father-God, but the holiness of God did not rebuke Him.

We are face-to-face with something unique in human experience: a good man—without a sense of sin. Can we abide in the hypothesis of His manhood? If it be granted that He was good, and if it be granted that a good man always has a keen sense of sin, are we not constrained to believe that He was something more than a good man? Speaking for myself, I am so constrained; I cannot abide in the belief that He was a mere man. I sought to live in that faith once, but He outgrew the category. Does He not outgrow the category in your mind as well? I do not suggest that the whole case rests on the one argument I have used, for that, by itself is but a scrap of the evidence. Yet it clearly points one way.

### **3. LET US STAND WITH PETER WHO SAID, “YOU ARE THE CHRIST.”**

No greater claim could be made for anyone. It is claimed for Him that He is the Promised of Israel, the self-disclosure of God. Dare we join the company of those who stake that claim?

What might a plain man ask of such a claimant to these high and august titles? Might he ask a sign? That is what the Jews asked from Him: “Give us a sign,” they said. What did they mean? They meant that He should show them a wonder, a miracle, some astonishing physical phenomenon. “Give us a sign,” they urged, and always He refused. After all, what would a miracle prove for spirituality and deep religion? The credentials of God are not to be found in signs and wonders and portents. “An evil and adulterous generation,” said Jesus, “seeks after a sign...and no sign shall be given to it.”

And in any case we cannot ask for such signs today. What would be proof to us? How can we be sure that He was all that they claimed He was? We must know the answer to this. If He was the Christ of God, all His words are dependable. If He was just a good man, and sadly self-deceived in His claim to speak with authority, we are utterly without hope in this dark world, and God was never spoken unambiguously by anyone.

Well...here are half a dozen reasons which might make us uncomfortable in the supposition that He was just a good man.

He accepted worship—which is the right of God alone.

He forgave sins—which, again, is God's unique prerogative.

His personal claims drive us to one clear alternative: either that He was deranged, or He was all that He said He was. "I am the bread of life." "I am the light of the world." "No one comes to the Father, but by me." "The Son of man is lord of the Sabbath." "He that loses his life for my sake shall save it." Jesus has won devoted adherents—and in increasing multitudes—as century has succeeded century. Nearly a third of the world now acknowledges the carpenter as King. The witness of time is emphatically with Him. He has won devoted followers among all the races of human beings. Muhammad said that this Muslim religion would flourish where the palm tree grew, and in the main, he was right. But no limit of clime or culture can be put to the sway of this Jesus. Africans and Eskimos, Chinese and Chileans—all declare that Jesus is Lord. Geography emphatically witnesses to Him.

Yet even that is not enough. Weighty as it is, the human heart craves for some proof. Is it possible for us to have a personal proof? I am sure it is. At the last, the proof is in you. I mean this. Every man or woman who really meets Jesus, feels the impress and challenge of His life. There is something utterly unique in meeting Him. Everybody who has had the experience—and a multitude of you have—is behind me in this assertion. When Christ looks at you, you know that

He sees you through and through—your secret hopes, your nameless fears, your gusty passions, your dirty, furtive sins. You cannot pose to Him. Yet, when you see how truly He loves you, though He knows the worst about you, and "beckons you to follow on His road," all that is decent in you leaps out in response. Your heart cries out for Him. You know it. You feel it. You would be lying if you denied that He pulled the heart out of you. That is the proof you were seeking. He embodies all that you have "willed or hoped or dreamed of good." He does not need to display any other credentials. Your heart knows Him, cries out to Him, and will not be satisfied without Him.

Oh! You can run away from Him like the rich young ruler did, but it is only your body that will run. Your heart will play you traitor. It knows its Lover and will abide with Him. Having truly seen Him once, it will hunger for Him forever. "None but Christ can satisfy." Though you live your whole long life through, in willful rebellion, and will not have this Man to rule over you, nothing and no one else can give you peace. Therefore, I say—if you would prove Him, meet Him. Open your heart to Him. Fashion your lips in prayer. It may be years since you prayed, and you may feel half foolish as you do so

now—but do it! It will take some of the stiff-necked pride out of you to come in penitence and petition to Christ.

#### 4. WE COME NOW TO THOMAS, WHO SAID, “MY LORD AND MY GOD.”

I suggested earlier that when Peter said, “**Thou art the Christ,**” it was a more profound statement that Peter himself perceived at the time. The twelve disciples were Jews to a man. They had been steeped in their high and ancient faith, and their belief in one God was as granite in their mind. “**Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord.**” The Messiah, the Promised One would come, they knew, but it is more than dubious that they ever expected God to come in person and as a working man. The fisherman of Galilee never pondered, I imagine, deep questions on the personality of the Deliverer. When Peter said, “**Thou art the Christ,**” it would be wrong to infer that he had already glimpsed the Christian doctrine of Christ—much less the doctrine of the Holy Trinity! It was Thomas who stepped nearer to the truth in the upper room. Christ had come back from the grave. He whom the winds and waves obeyed—conquered death also. Without understanding all that He said, down on his knees went Thomas and spoke from the depth of his soul, the words which all humanity will one day echo: “**My Lord and my God.**” No other category is big enough. God! God himself! He has visited and redeemed His people.

I conclude with a personal testimony. The one desolating doubt I have had in my adult religious life was on this question. It was midnight in my soul, but I emerged more sure than ever, and the passing years deepen my conviction. I am quite sure now. Christ was incarnate God. He is utterly trustworthy. Travel with Him, and travel in confidence. (Forgive me if I should be presumptuous, but I have tested Him, and have been tested, in many ways.) I have no doubt that God spoke through the Hebrew prophets, and through other sages, but His fullest final word was Christ. All men must come to Him at the last. He has the answer to the problems of our private lives, our families, our businesses, our civic and national affairs. Apart from His triumph I see no hopeful prospect for our race. He is our rightful Lord and God.

I offer Him to you again. He cannot rule the world until He rules you. For some of you, it could be now, but if it cannot be now, God speed the day when you can get down beside Thomas and say with utter sincerity, “**My Lord and my God.**”

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