

MESSAGES from LIBERTY

“YOUR GOD IS TOO SMALL”

2. Gentle Jesus, Meek & Mild
(Matthew 21:12-23; Matthew 23:13-36)

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It's a sign that it's time to retire when you realize that all your favorite Christian books are out of print! But like Becky last week, I'm still going to preach today from the classic Christian book *Your God is Too Small* by J.B. Phillips. It's a short book – just 124 pages – and easy reading.

J.B. Phillips was an English clergyman who lived in the middle of the last century and who was a colleague of C.S. Lewis. In addition to writing *Your God is Too Small* and other books, Phillips is best known for writing an easy-reading, paraphrased translation of the New Testament. Back during World War II, when all the church had was the King James translation, Phillips wrote a readable translation of the Bible for his youth group. In fact, his translation is still my favorite for Romans 12:2, traditionally translated as, “Do not be conformed to this world”, but Phillips paraphrases as: “Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its mold.”

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In *Your God is Too Small*, Phillips appeals to Christians to wake up their faith by examining how they unconsciously imagine what God is like, as opposed to how God has revealed Himself in the New Testament. Phillips' basic insight is that most Christians – each one of us – is holding on to an understanding of God that is way too small. And in the first part of his book, Phillips takes a critical look at some thirteen misconceptions of God that are way too small. This morning, we're going to walk through one of them: “Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild”.

Phillips writes this:

It is a thousand pities that the English word “child” has so few words that rhyme with it appropriately for a hymn. But for this paucity of language, we might have been spared the couplet that hundreds of thousands have learned in their childhood:

*Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,
Look upon a little child.*

Of all the descriptions that could be applied to Christ, this seems one of the least appropriate.

At our New Jersey church, we used to hold an annual “Dumpster Day” – each September we parked an 11-yard dumpster outside the doors of the church hall and we filled it with all the junk that had accumulated in the church over the previous year. (By the way,

although this is an excellent idea for Liberty, this is NOT the point I want you to take away from this morning's sermon!). And on the very first dumpster day at the Presbyterian Church of Upper Montclair in 1994, I went through the Church School classrooms, and I took down the "Meek & Mild Jesus" picture and I tossed it in the dumpster. You know this picture¹:

Why did I throw it in the dumpster? Because this painting captures exactly the too-small image of Jesus that Phillips is talking about.

- First of all – Jesus is way too Anglo-looking. If there had been cameras in first century Palestine, Jesus would have resembled Yasser Arafat a lot more than he resembles the guy in this painting.
- I also don't like this rendering of Jesus because it's too other-worldly. He's looking up, to the heavens, as if he's not really engaged in the mission God gave him on earth.
- I also find this Jesus painting a little creepy. Honestly, moms – would you let your kid get in a car with this guy?

But mostly, I have never liked this infamous painting of Jesus because it paints him according to the children's hymn – he's Mister Meek and Mild. He's the "Pale Galilean": soft features, long, well-groomed hair with just the right amount of wave, maybe holding a little sheep in his arms, perhaps a dove perched on his shoulder, a little dove doo-doo running down his arm. It's an image of Jesus that doesn't fit with how the New Testament describes him.

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We have two Scripture passages this morning. I've could have chosen a dozen more, but these two form a set. In the *Gospel of Matthew*, Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, which is recorded in chapter 21. And immediately, Jesus goes to the Temple. After doing a remarkably "un-mild" thing (which we'll get to in a second), Jesus spends the night in the neighboring village of Bethany. The next day, he's back in the Temple, teaching the crowds who've gathered for Passover and debating with the religious authorities. Jesus teaches straight through to chapter 23, which ends with our second passage. In other words, our two Scripture passages mark the start and the finish of the entire time that Jesus spends in the Temple during his last days before his crucifixion. First and last things – they're always especially important. And neither of them is remotely mild!

First, Jesus almost starts a riot:

¹ https://www.leafletonline.com/head-of-christ-picture?m=Configurable&176=8255&aid=11712&gclid=CjwKCAiA7t3yBRADEiwA4GFII05mPLUOneKyoQ1TOHPvLVuhPzTLdTgM4SQ8YgxAfuvq9MkqrdhzhjhoC24oQAvD_BwE

Jesus entered the Temple and began to drive out all the people buying and selling animals for sacrifice. He knocked over the tables of the money changers and the chairs of those selling doves. He said to them, "The Scriptures declare, 'My Temple will be called a house of prayer,' but you have turned it into a den of thieves!"

Remember, this is Jesus' first visit to Jerusalem. Up until now, all of his teaching, all of his miracles, all of his ministry has taken place way up north in Galilee. But now Jesus finally comes to Jerusalem, entering with a parade in front of a huge, enthusiastic crowd yelling,

"Praise God for the Son of David!

Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

And then Jesus hops off his donkey, goes right to the Temple and turns everything upside down – literally. Sheep are running loose, doves are flapping away, coins are rolling around on the ground, because Jesus is flat-out angry. He comes into the Temple – his Father's house – and discovers that people are treating it like a marketplace, selling faith and peddling forgiveness, making a mockery of everything sacred. And when he's finished demolishing the Temple trading tables, Jesus doesn't stop, collect himself, take a cleansing breath and say, "Hey, I'm sorry. I kind of lost it there." No – he blazes with prophetic zeal.

Two chapters later, after spending the whole next day teaching in the Temple, Jesus winds it all up with these words. First, he addresses the crowds:

"The scribes and the Pharisees are the official interpreters of the law of Moses. So practice and obey whatever they tell you – but don't follow their example. For they don't practice what they teach! They crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burden.

"Everything they do is for show. On their arms they wear extra wide prayer boxes with Scripture verses inside, and they wear robes with extra-long tassels.

And then the supposedly "meek and mild" Jesus turns and addresses the scribes and Pharisees directly:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees – hypocrites! For you shut the door of the Kingdom of Heaven in people's faces. You won't go in yourselves, and you don't let others enter either.

...

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees – hypocrites! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore the more important aspects of the law — justice, mercy, and faith. ... Blind guides! ...

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees – hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs — beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with death and impurity. Outwardly you look like righteous people, but inwardly your hearts are filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness."

I don't know any children's hymns with lyrics like these!

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So, what do we learn about Jesus when we take our cue, not from children’s hymns, but from the Gospels themselves?

- We discover that “mild” is not a helpful adjective for Jesus. That if our image of Jesus is that he’s “meek and mild”, we’re missing the truth about him. Because the Gospels tell us that Jesus got angry, especially when the things of God were being misused.
- We learn that Jesus was his own “straight talk express”: “Blind guides! Hypocrites!”
- We see that Jesus could be confrontational, he even initiated confrontation – he wasn’t always trying to “win friends and influence people.”
- And we learn that Jesus is strong – physically strong, emotionally strong, spiritually strong.

The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann puts it this way:

We have made Jesus too pious, too nice, too patient, too polite. He was none of these. He was a dangerous alternative kind of power that was prepared to name names and call a spade a spade.... His honesty was grounded in his confidence in who God is, in God’s Kingdom.²

You see, the “meek and mild” Jesus we learned to sing about as a child is a Jesus designed for toddlers. Of course, we don’t want children to be afraid of God! Of course, we want our little ones to feel safe in church! But “there’s nothing to be afraid of” isn’t the Gospel message about Jesus. Because while Jesus is our savior, he isn’t safe.

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Now I need to say this: We’ll miss what J.B. Phillips is driving out when he points out how “the Pale Galilean” is a misunderstanding of Jesus if we think that Phillips is promoting the other extreme – that Jesus is some kind of a macho-man, like he was portrayed in Mel Gibson’s movie “The Passion of the Christ”, where Jesus is not only not mild, but he’s kind of a Jewish “Braveheart”, manning up in a big way.

That’s not Phillips’ point. Instead, Phillips’ point is that if we understand Jesus as “meek and mild”, if we see him as weak, then we’ll assume he can only weakly help us. That we’ll see Jesus kind of like the stereotypical way ministers are portrayed on TV – well-intentioned and nice, but ineffective, irrelevant, beside the point. That if we believe that Jesus is “meek and mild”, it will be hard for us to believe that He’s up to being our Lord and Savior when it comes to the big things of life.

² *A Gospel of Hope* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), p. 50.

But that's the message that comes hurtling out through the pages of the Gospel, of the whole New Testament: Jesus is our Savior and Lord because he is able to be our Savior and Lord, because his love is so deep and his grace is so strong and his spirit is so powerful that he can help us effectively and powerfully:

- Jesus is able to save us from the big dilemmas in life: estrangement, confusion, hopelessness.
- And Jesus is able to save us from our big fears in life: grief, failure, death.
- And Jesus is able to save us from the big sins in life: our addictions, our ugliness, our lostness.

It's a false picture, it's an outdated childhood image, it's a vain idol to picture Jesus as "meek and mild." Because Jesus is strong, and tenacious, and able to help us savingly in the big things in life.

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On Oriental Trading, you can buy this: "Plush Jesus".³ For \$6.49 plus taxes and shipping. The promo says:

Seeking a hands-on way to get kids excited about their faith? Try this stuffed Jesus doll, which makes a great religious gift for a christening or a First Communion. Little believers can use Him to act out Bible scenes. Buy in bulk and hand them out to Sunday School students as Easter gifts.

Well, here's the deal: Liberty will not be buying "Plush Jesuses" and handing them out to Sunday School students as Easter gifts this year. Or any year.

Because Jesus isn't plush. Jesus is not "The Pale Galilean". Jesus is not "meek and mild". Because Jesus is God, who became fully human – fully engaged, fully strong, fully intense, fully committed to his God-given mission to save us from the big dilemmas and the big fears and the big sins in our lives, with a strength and ability that is powerfully loving and savingly strong.

And that's exactly what each of us needs. Jesus – the real Jesus – is exactly what we need. Because he is the good news, through and through. AMEN

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³ https://www.orientaltrading.com/plush-jesus-a2-13785952.fltr?sku=13785952&BP=PS544&ms=search&source=google&cm_mmc=GooglePLA-_-736570281-_-44071635732-_-13785952&cm_mmca1=OTC%2BPLAs&cm_mmca2=GooglePLAs&cm_mmca3=PS544&cm_mmca4=FS39&cm_mmca5=Shopping&cm_mmca6=PLAs&cm_mmcl0=Shopping&cm_mmcall=13785952&cm_mmca12=Plush-Jesus&gclid=Cj0KCQiAwP3yBRCKARIsAABGiPq8q_IsJG_eoQRMwnquLuVn44s5GPE3avGjIY8tdFdv9FxfavBrv0waAqBnEALw_wcB