

one

Jesus
Love

Jesus Loves

**the Bitter
and Betrayed**

Craig

Over the course of the week, Jason and I find ourselves hanging out with people who are not the typical crowd for an ordained pastor. To most Christians, our social circles look like a tangled web of contradiction. But I have discovered that through contradiction and confusion can come greater clarity.

I am a pastor. I am married with two kids, and I have one goal: to tell others about the Jesus who changed my life so he can change theirs. It sounds cliché, but I have given my life to spiritually leading other people to a life worth living—a life where the actions, ideas, and character of Jesus are apparent. The ways of Jesus work, and I want to communicate that to anyone who will listen.

As I write this, I am thirty-three years old. I was once a youth pastor, and many of my former youth pastor peers have gone on to become senior pastors (or “lead pastors,” as the current trend puts it) in churches across the country. One of these great friends is Jason Harper, another former youth pastor turned . . . well, I’ll get to that.

I am known by a lot of people as the “Porn Pastor” because I started a ministry called www.XXXchurch.com seven

years ago that has taken me around the world speaking out on issues of pornography while also loving those in the porn industry. We go to porn conventions and hand out Bibles that proudly proclaim “Jesus Loves Porn Stars.” We drive a bus up and down the Las Vegas strip that says “Jesus Loves Sin City.” So, writing a book called *Jesus Loves You* is one of my biggest thrills, because I have witnessed firsthand the healing power of this message. Those words, no matter how they are stated, should not be misunderstood.

Jesus loves . . . now, fill in the blank. Think of crooks and soccer moms, prostitutes and pastors, porn stars and CEOs. Jesus loves every one of them. To Jesus, we’re all just people who need God to save us from the mess we are in and lead us to a better way.

Back to Jason. He is technically a pastor, but I call him the Cable Guy. Somebody told him he had it too easy when it came to talking to people about Jesus because he worked in a church. Jason took that as a challenge and accepted a job in one of the most dreaded trades: bill collections for a television cable company.

He figured that if God can work there, God can work anywhere.

Believing the Bible is true and the principles of Jesus are transferable to any venue, Jason, our resident Cable Guy, wanted to answer these questions:

Could an ordinary pastor practice what he preached?

Could the methods of reaching people taught in the church on Sunday hold water with the Cable Guy collecting outstanding payments on Monday?

As an outreach pastor, Jason Harper stepped beyond the pulpit of his local church and into the homes of his local neighborhood to experience real stories of real people transformed by a real Savior.

So, as you read this book, don't assume that because two pastors wrote it, we are your typical Sunday morning TV preachers. We aren't. We spend most of our time outside the church with unchurched people. We don't care if they are people who can't pay their cable bill or people who perform for videos that show up on late-night cable.

Doesn't matter what you do or who you are: Jesus. Loves. You.

The Problem

Over the last two thousand years, Jesus' vision and values have been distorted, twisted, hijacked, tweaked, relabeled, and distorted again. Those who have followed Jesus have subtly, over time, redefined his plan to fit their particular motives, their agendas . . . their worlds. Now the concept

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of living a sacrificial life that is attractive to the broken has largely been replaced with a religious exclusivity that has *made* people broken.

In the hands of everyone from derailed evangelicals to deceptive evangelists, Jesus' message has been hijacked.

Take a look back over time. From day to day, to months and years and decades and centuries, the plotline has

remained the same. The Savior of the world has been sabotaged.

It may have started as small and subtle—and probably not that harmful, actually. Perhaps a quote taken out of context here, a little misunderstanding there. But eventually these little distortions, these little twistings, turned into all-out manipulations and misrepresentations of the King of the universe.

The most effective hijacking of Jesus and his will has come from those who claim to live for him but really don't. Shortly after the first millennium ended, in AD 1095, Godfrey de Bouillon, a French knight, led the First Crusade and founded the Kingdom of Jerusalem. Religion was leveraged and legislated. Essentially, if a person didn't believe in the established order, they were ostracized, isolated from the mainstream—sometimes even killed. Later, the infamous Constantine used the name of Jesus to manipulate, murder, and monopolize.¹

Let me give just one example. Constantine controlled commerce. When shippers would try to sell or buy, there were two menus: one for Christians and one for non-Christians. If someone was trying to save a buck, they simply lied and claimed to be Christian, even though they had no allegiance to Jesus, no relationship with him. This form of exclusive commerce killed the distinctive identity of Christians and made Jesus into a coupon.

Fast-forward a few centuries to the Crusades. Christians were at war with Muslims. Christians rolled into villages and inquired of the leadership, "Who is of Christ?" Those who

would not confess Christ were promptly beheaded. It was an early form of terrorism!

Over time in these regions, selfish ambition and the pursuit of political power was cloaked in Christ's name. Resentment boiled against anyone who believed. The chasm between believers and unbelievers increased. People used religion to steal and extort. Jesus, it came to be understood, was not about giving, only getting.

His message, sacrifice, and even his name were hijacked.

Yet there have always been the faithful. Think about all the hospitals, schools, and charities followers of Jesus have built. Think about all the kids who are fed and housed in the developing world because of Christians.

Christianity is a mixed bag.

Recently, a car pulled out in front of me. Its bumper was plastered with stickers. One said, "Follow me to my Baptist church!" while another said, "Nuke Iran."

Hijacked.

Inch by inch, from his thorn-scarred head to his nail-holed feet, Jesus has been resketched until the picture no longer matches the man. In the church, one pew is filled with revolutionaries who want to love and lead people, while another pew seats people who aren't even aware they're in it for themselves.

Many people I talk to see Jesus as somebody who micro-manages the events of day-to-day living. They think Jesus' only desire is to take away freedoms and fun and to exclude every person who doesn't always say and do the right things. The real Jesus had nothing to do with that kind of program.

He came to free people from slavery to the law and to be the bridge between God and humanity.

Our world is in the midst of global chaos, and we desperately need a Savior. As I write this, over fifty-nine countries are engaged in some level of war.² According to the SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute) and population data, “about 2.15 billion people—a third of the world’s population—live in countries currently beset by armed con-

lict.”³ Extreme poverty affects a third of the world’s population. Nearly a billion people do not have access to clean water. Over one million people have lost their jobs in the US in the first part of 2009. If the world was ever primed to hear, accept, and walk with Jesus, it is now.

The chasm between those who live like Jesus and those who are still asking what he would do is increasing. And a third group does not know what or who to believe.

A Conversation

Recently Jason and I were in Nashville. I was doing a talk on the degenerating effects of porn. Across the stage was Ron Jeremy, one of the most popular porn stars in America. Ron and I often speak on college campuses to explain our different views, and over the course of these discussions, we

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have gotten to know each other quite well. Watching the presentation backstage were Jason and two other friends, Greg and John, who arrange these college speaking engagements for Ron and me.

After the presentation, Ron vanished to his room, and Jason and I went out to eat with Greg and John. From snippets of past conversations with Greg and from hearing about some of his rants, it was clear to me that God was nowhere on his radar. But he liked talking with me, he said, because he saw something different in me.

Maybe tonight was different. Maybe it had nothing to do with God. Maybe he was probing deeper because I had embraced Ron as a friend and not judged him.

Before the main dish hit the table, Greg leaned toward me and spoke with an inquisitive tone that made me feel like he was really digging for some answers. “Craig, your belief is very different from what I have seen. The Christians I’ve met are jerks.”

I knew this was a broad generalization from Greg. Part of me agreed with him.

Before I could respond, Greg continued.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure,” I said, hoping it would be about the presentation or, even better, what I wanted for dinner. No chance.

“Who is God? Who wrote the Bible and how do we know that it is real?”

I paused for a moment and swallowed the rest of my fried pickle. Then, in my most clear and concise fashion, I started with the first question and moved on through. I knew Greg wasn’t baiting me—this was a genuine quest

in his heart, and I wanted to be clear. I asked Jason for his input.

Together we walked through each element that makes the Bible different from any other document. We talked about the Dead Sea Scrolls, the fulfilled prophecies of Isaiah, and the historical evidence from the writings of Josephus.

Over the course of thirty minutes, our conversation hit on the historical, mathematical, even the scientific value and authenticity of scripture.

Then it ramped up. Greg kept digging. His persistence was genuine. In no way did I feel like he wanted to debate me; instead, I felt like he wanted to dig through all his preconceived notions— notions planted by Christians who peddled an imitation Jesus.

As these thoughts dawned on me, I could feel myself getting angry and sidetracked. Not at the conversation, but at Christians who had done so much damage.

Greg's words snapped me back into focus.

"Why do you claim there is only one way to God . . . this Jesus story?"

I pondered, looked at Jason, took a deep breath, then spoke. "All of our futures really hang on that answer!"

We honed in on the defining factors of Jesus, and I could tell Jason wanted to get into what had become a two-way conversation.

"Jason, you wanna jump in here?"

Jason began to scratch out the difference between Jesus and other world religious leaders. I talked about the differ-

ence between the Jesus of scripture and the Jesus whom Greg and John had seen sold on TV.

Those two pictures were worlds apart.

As we wrapped up the three-hour dinner, the restaurant was nearly empty. And so was my heart. I had this empty place that had been dug up by the realization that Greg and John had never been given a clear explanation of the Jesus I live for.

They spoke of the many times Christians had told them they were going to hell. They spoke of moments they thought were spiritual, but never could attach that feeling to Jesus. They spoke of a hunger to go deeper, but had never been invited into a conversation that would allow them to belong.

Re-Branding Jesus

I realized in that moment this is where the re-branding of Jesus needs to occur. Western culture has set up a progress-based system for advancing toward God.

Let me explain. For a long time Christians have been taught a three-step approach to God. It starts with belief. Essentially, if you believe the right things, it will lead to a change in behavior. When you have changed your behavior, you will be accepted by the church. Believe, Behave, Belong.

If you believe this way, you will behave this way, and if you behave this way, you can belong here. This is preached, modeled, and affirmed in thousands of churches across America.

It's time to flip this. The Jesus of scripture reached out and loved people regardless of where they were. It is essential to show people that they can belong in your world even if they don't act, think, behave, or believe like you.

Imagine a church or community where Jesus was communicated in such a way that everyone belonged. They were included. And from this feeling of belonging, over time the message of Jesus made an impact on their belief. And from that newfound fullness of God, their behavior changed.

If this practice won out over religious dogma, rooted in rules and regulations, more people would find hope in the authentic Christ.

That's what Greg and John needed. That's what Greg and John wanted.

We parted ways for the evening, and Jason was quiet the rest of the night. I was too.

Before we all went our ways, I got to tie up some loose ends with John and Greg. Both thanked me for the dinner and dialogue. The next morning I received an email from Greg. I won't forget his words:

"Craig, the time you and Jason spent with us last night was awesome. I told my girlfriend that if I met more Christians like you guys, maybe my beliefs would be different."

I don't tell this story to pat myself on the back. Not even close. It's meant to bring perspective to the discussion.

**It is essential to show
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or believe like you.**

Greg and John had been sold a fabricated counterfeit picture of Jesus. Sure it looked the part, but under examination, the value was not there. They had only seen a plastic version of a priceless Christ.

For too long he has been misquoted and misrepresented by misguided, if well-meaning, people.

The bottom line is this: as the chasm between the real Jesus and the counterfeit Jesus gets wider, Jesus becomes more and more irrelevant.

This book is about two guys who love Jesus and believe Jesus loves you just as much as he loves us.

That's why we wrote this book. It is about two guys who love Jesus and believe Jesus loves you just as much as he loves us. It is about rebuilding, restating, and reinstituting the hope and faith that was birthed at the cross where Jesus died.

The results are in. Those outside of the church with limited or no faith are jaded, feeling bitter and betrayed. Those within faith circles who look down on them are judgmental.

The jaded and the judgmental. Both need to be reconnected to a simple truth: Jesus loves them. Regardless of how they got to this place, both are disconnected from the full purpose they were created to complete.

This we know.

1. Bruno Bleckmann, "Sources for the History of Constantine," *Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*, ed. Noel Lenski (Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press, 2006). Cambridge Collections Online, Cambridge University Press. Accessed 6 March 2009.

2. <http://www.peace2k.org/atwar.html>.

3. <http://answers.google.com/answers/threadview/id/405897.html>.