

But in only one place—perhaps the most wonderful words ever uttered by human lips—do we hear Jesus himself open up to us his very heart:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matt. 11:28–30)¹

In the one place in the Bible where the Son of God pulls back the veil and lets us peer way down into the core of who he is, we are not told that he is “austere and demanding in heart.” We are not told that he is “exalted and dignified in heart.” We are not even told that he is “joyful and generous in heart.” Letting Jesus set the terms, his surprising claim is that he is “gentle and lowly in heart.”

One thing to get straight right from the start is that when the Bible speaks of the heart, whether Old Testament or New, it is not speaking of our emotional life only but of the central animating center of all we do. It is what gets us out of bed in the morning and what we daydream about as we drift off to sleep. It is our motivation headquarters. The heart, in biblical terms, is not part of who we are but the center of who we are. Our heart is what defines and directs us. That is why Solomon tells us to “keep [the] heart with all vigilance, for from it flows the springs of life” (Prov. 4:23).² The

- 1 Matt. 11:29 was the German Reformer Philip Melancthon’s favorite verse in the Bible. Herman Bavinck, “John Calvin: A Lecture on the Occasion of His 400th Birthday,” trans. John Bolt, *The Bavinck Review* 1 (2010): 62.
- 2 Another Puritan, John Flavel, devoted a whole treatise to this verse and to strategies to maintain the heart: John Flavel, *Keeping the Heart: How to Maintain Your Love for God* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2012).

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heart is a matter of life. It is what makes us the human being each of us is. The heart drives all we do. It is who we are.³

And when Jesus tells us what animates him most deeply, what is most true of him—when he exposes the innermost recesses of his being—what we find there is: gentle and lowly.

Who could ever have thought up such a Savior?

“I am gentle . . .”

The Greek word translated “gentle” here occurs just three other times in the New Testament: in the first beatitude, that “the *meek*” will inherit the earth (Matt. 5:5); in the prophecy in Matthew 21:5 (quoting Zech. 9:9) that Jesus the king “is coming to you, *humble*, and mounted on a donkey”; and in Peter’s encouragement to wives to nurture more than anything else “the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a *gentle* and quiet spirit” (1 Pet. 3:4). Meek. Humble. Gentle. Jesus is not trigger-happy. Not harsh, reactionary, easily exasperated. He is the most understanding person in the universe. The posture most natural to him is not a pointed finger but open arms.

“ . . . and lowly . . .”

The meaning of the word “lowly” overlaps with that of “gentle,” together communicating a single reality about Jesus’s heart. This specific word *lowly* is generally translated “humble” in the New

³ An excellent treatment on the Bible’s teaching on the heart along these lines is Craig Troxel, *With All Your Heart: Orienting Your Mind, Desires, and Will toward Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

Testament, such as in James 4:6: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the *humble*." But typically throughout the New Testament this Greek word refers not to humility as a virtue but to humility in the sense of destitution or being thrust downward by life circumstance (which is also how this Greek word is generally used throughout the Greek versions of the Old Testament, especially in the psalms). In Mary's song while pregnant with Jesus, for example, this word is used to speak of the way God exalts those who are "of humble estate" (Luke 1:52). Paul uses the word when he tells us to "not be haughty, but associate with the *lowly*" (Rom. 12:16), referring to the socially unimpressive, those who are not the life of the party but rather cause the host to cringe when they show up.

The point in saying that Jesus is lowly is that he is *accessible*. For all his resplendent glory and dazzling holiness, his supreme uniqueness and otherness, no one in human history has ever been more approachable than Jesus Christ. No prerequisites. No hoops to jump through. Warfield, commenting on Matthew 11:29, wrote: "No impression was left by his life-manifestation more deeply imprinted upon the consciousness of his followers than that of the noble humility of his bearing."⁴ The minimum bar to be enfolded into the embrace of Jesus is simply: open yourself up to him. It is all he needs. Indeed, it is the only thing he works with. Verse 28 of our passage in Matthew 11 tells us explicitly who qualifies for fellowship with Jesus: "all who labor and are heavy laden." You don't need to unburden or collect yourself and then come to Jesus. Your very burden is what qualifies you to come. No payment is required; he

⁴ B. B. Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ* (Oxford, UK: Benediction Classics, 2015), 140.

says, "I will *give* you rest." you are actively working hard ("labor") or passively find outside your control ("he find rest, that you come in

"Gentle and lowly." This is Christ's very heart. This is Accommodating. Understand *one thing about who Jesus is: if our answer is, gentle and*

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This is not who he is to he is for those who come who cry to him for help. Jesus gives us a picture of himself to you, Chorazin! Woe to you be more tolerable on the day than for you" (Matt. 11:21, "mushy and frothy."

But for the penitent, his heart is not matched by our sins and failures. For he occasionally acts toward our heart. He can't un-gentle himself to you or I can change our eye

HIS VERY HEART

says, "I will *give* you rest." His rest is gift, not transaction. Whether you are actively working hard to crowbar your life into smoothness ("labor") or passively finding yourself weighed down by something outside your control ("heavy laden"), Jesus Christ's desire that you find rest, that you come in out of the storm, outstrips even your own.

"Gentle and lowly." This, according to his own testimony, is Christ's very heart. This is who he is. Tender. Open. Welcoming. Accommodating. Understanding. Willing. *If we are asked to say only one thing about who Jesus is, we would be honoring Jesus's own teaching if our answer is, gentle and lowly.*

If Jesus hosted his own personal website, the most prominent line of the "About Me" dropdown would read: GENTLE AND LOWLY IN HEART.

This is not who he is to everyone, indiscriminately. This is who he is for those who come to him, who take his yoke upon them, who cry to him for help. The paragraph before these words from Jesus gives us a picture of how Jesus handles the impenitent: "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! . . . I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you" (Matt. 11:21, 24). "Gentle and lowly" does not mean "mushy and frothy."

But for the penitent, his heart of gentle embrace is never out-matched by our sins and foibles and insecurities and doubts and anxieties and failures. For lowly gentleness is not one way Jesus occasionally acts toward others. Gentleness is who he is. It is his heart. He can't un-gentle himself toward his own any more than you or I can change our eye color. It's who we are.

he actions of Jesus are reflective of who he most deeply is, we cannot avoid the conclusion that it is the very fallenness which he came to undo that is most irresistibly attractive to him.

This is deeper than saying Jesus is loving or merciful or gracious. The cumulative testimony of the four Gospels is that when Jesus Christ sees the fallenness of the world all about him, his deepest impulse, his most natural instinct, is to move toward that sin and suffering, not away from it.

One way to see this is against the backdrop of the Old Testament category of clean and unclean. In biblical terms these categories generally refer not to physical hygiene but to moral purity. The two cannot be completely disentangled, but moral or ethical cleanness is the primary meaning. This is evident in that the solution for uncleanness was not taking a bath but offering a sacrifice (Lev. 5:6). The problem was not dirt but guilt (Lev. 5:3). The Old Testament Jews, therefore, operated under a sophisticated system of degrees of uncleanness and various offerings and rituals to become morally clean once more. One particularly striking part of this system is that when an unclean person comes into contact with a clean person, that clean person then becomes unclean. Moral dirtiness is contagious.

Consider Jesus. In Levitical categories, he is the cleanest person to ever walk the face of the earth. He was the Clean One. Whatever horrors cause us to cringe—we who are naturally unclean and fallen—would cause Jesus to cringe all the more. We cannot fathom the sheer purity, holiness, cleanness, of his mind and heart. The simplicity, the innocence, the loveliness.

And what did he do first impulse when he moved toward them. P compassion. He spent all can testify to the h something warm word something deeper in C versing the Jewish syste an unclean sinner, Chri became clean.

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³ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jes* M. Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1 *God and the New Creation*, Short S 2015), 43.

And what did he do when he saw the unclean? What was his first impulse when he came across prostitutes and lepers? He moved toward them. Pity flooded his heart, the longing of true compassion. He spent time with them. He touched them. We all can testify to the humaneness of touch. A warm hug does something warm words of greeting alone cannot. But there is something deeper in Christ's touch of compassion. He was reversing the Jewish system. When Jesus, the Clean One, touched an unclean sinner, Christ did not become unclean. The sinner became clean.

Jesus Christ's earthly ministry was one of giving back to underserving sinners their humanity. We tend to think of the miracles of the Gospels as interruptions in the natural order. Yet German theologian Jürgen Moltmann points out that miracles are not an interruption of the natural order but the restoration of the natural order. We are so used to a fallen world that sickness, disease, pain, and death seem natural. In fact, *they* are the interruption.

When Jesus expels demons and heals the sick, he is driving out of creation the powers of destruction, and is healing and restoring created beings who are hurt and sick. The lordship of God to which the healings witness, restores creation to health. Jesus' healings are not supernatural miracles in a natural world. They are the only truly "natural" thing in a world that is unnatural, demonized and wounded.³

³ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, trans. M. Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 98. Similarly Graeme Goldsworthy, *The Son of God and the New Creation*, Short Studies in Biblical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 43.

Jesus walked the earth rehumanizing the dehumanized and cleansing the unclean. Why? Because his heart refused to let him sleep in. Sadness confronted him in every town. So wherever he went, whenever he was confronted with pain and longing, he spread the good contagion of his cleansing mercy. Thomas Goodwin said, "Christ is love covered over in flesh."⁴ Picture it. Pull back the flesh on the Stepford Wives or the Terminator and you find machine; pull back the flesh on Christ and you find love.

If compassion clothed itself in a human body and went walking around this earth, what would it look like? We don't have to wonder.

But that was when he lived on earth. What about today?

Here we remember that the testimony of the New Testament is that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8). The same Christ who wept at the tomb of Lazarus weeps with us in our lonely despair. The same one who reached out and touched lepers puts his arm around us today when we feel misunderstood and sidelined. The Jesus who reached out and cleansed messy sinners reaches into our souls and answers our half-hearted plea for mercy with the mighty invincible cleansing of one who cannot bear to do otherwise.

In other words, Christ's heart is not far off despite his presence now in heaven, for he does all this by his own Spirit. We will give focused attention to the relationship between Christ's heart and the Holy Spirit in chapter 13. For now we simply note that through the Spirit, Christ himself not only touches us but lives within us.

⁴ Thomas Goodwin, *The Heart of Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2011), 61.

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The New Testament teaches that we are united to Christ, a union so intimate that whatever our own body parts do, Christ's body can be said to do (1 Cor. 6:15–16). *Jesus Christ is closer to you today than he was to the sinners and sufferers he spoke with and touched in his earthly ministry.* Through his Spirit, Christ's own heart envelops his people with an embrace nearer and tighter than any physical embrace could ever achieve. His actions on earth in a body reflected his heart; the same heart now acts in the same ways toward us, for *we are now his body.*

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