THE JESUS DIFFERENCE by David Diestelkamp

“Search and look, for no prophet has arisen out of Galilee”, are the words of skeptics who wrestled with the unconventional Jesus (Jn. 7:52). A compassionate suffering servant king who invited the weary and overburdened to find rest in Him wasn’t what people expected as their Messiah. His challenge to see blessing and happiness in poverty, mourning, meekness, hunger, thirst, and being merciful stretched most people to their breaking point. Some broke and left Him, while others broke and remained at His feet.
 Jesus was different and He made others different.On the way to the cross, Jesus said, “For if they do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?" (Lk .23:31). If people don’t do the right things when things are easy, what’s going to happen when difficult days come? He applied it to the disaster of the destruction of Jerusalem, but a general application can be made to the virus pandemic we are facing. Things are getting “dry” for many people. The darkness of the world will become darker, but now, more than ever, our distinctiveness must shine. Christ has made us different, and in crisis that difference must not be compromised—not even to survive with the world.
 Read Matthew 5 from the Jesus difference perspective: the world doesn’t murder, but we don’t get angry, we reconcile (5:21-26); while others don’t commit adultery, we aren’t even lusting (5:27-30); our culture accepts all divorce, we won’t divorce except for fornication (5:31-32); while others swear, our “Yes” and “No” are enough (5:33-37); the “eye for an eye” retaliation is everywhere but in us, we don’t resist an evil person and we willingly give to others (5:38-42); and “love your neighbor and hate your enemy” doesn’t resonate with us who are committed to “love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you” (5:43-44)
 Why would children of God act so counter-culturally, so unnaturally? Jesus said that the reason is: “that you may be sons of your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:45). That we are children of God is the reason. God the Father is different and therefore so are His children. That difference is a family resemblance or else we are not part of His family. He is not the Father of those who don’t look like Him.
 Keep reading in Matthew 5: “For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? (5:46). The difference Jesus makes in us is supposed to show in the fact that we love differently than those who are not Christians. Does it show in us? Do we only love the loveable; people who are nice, who are loving, who reciprocate our words and service? If we only love those who love us, how is our love any different from those of the world? How has Jesus made us different? How are we really like Him?
 It’s not easy loving the unlovable, but forgiving the unforgiveable may be even harder for some of us. To help us, God reminds us that, “if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Mt 6:14-15). This isn’t just a threat by God to leverage obedience, He is telling us that our forgiving others reveals our true character, our familial resemblance. He doesn’t forgive those who don’t forgive others because this shows they aren’t any different from the world, they ARE of the world.
 The Jesus difference touches everything from the very fiber of our being, souls, and character (love, forgiveness, etc.) to daily mundane things. After talking about loving the unlovable, Jesus said, “And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so?” (Matt. 5:47). Are even our greetings supposed to be different from others? Yes! We connect differently with others. We talk differently with others. The widows, the orphans, the homeless, strangers, and people who are somehow different from us – we sincerely greet them. We’re interested and kind. No matter what the world says, no one is unworthy or unclean. It’s different. It may not feel natural or even safe at times. But we are different. Everything Jesus did wasn’t always natural and safe, and it’ll be the same for His true followers (Jn. 13:15-16).
 When our well-being is threatened, we are tempted to allow the natural man to go into survival mode—fight or flight. We’re seeing that in our stores as people demonstrate selfishness, panic, and lack of love for their neighbors. But we are different. We “do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:18). The world sees empty shelves, we see opportunity to trust God and share with others. The world becomes helpless, we are reminded that the power is of God. We are not crushed, not despairing, not forsaken, not destroyed (2 Cor. 4:7-9). Unbelievers won’t understand the Jesus difference. Some believers won’t understand the Jesus difference. But that won’t change those who have truly been made different by Jesus.
 In Acts 4, Peter and John were arrested after healing a lame man and preaching in the temple. Notice the impact they had on the Jewish rulers at their hearing: “Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus” (Ac. 4:13). Even their enemies recognized the Jesus difference. Let Jesus make us different. Act so righteously, lovingly, compassionately, patiently, so differently during this crisis that people will say, “They have been with Jesus!”

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