

WHY DO YOU CALL ME “LORD”?

There is a difference between a Lord and a Savior. We lump the two words together so often that sometimes this gets a little obscured. A *Savior* is someone who saves us. We could talk the rest of the day about what our Savior saves us from, and how, and maybe even why. A *Lord* is someone we follow and obey. Two sides of the same coin for most of us; nevertheless, very different. In the twelve-step program, for instance, it's the difference between the third step and the eleventh step. Both are wondrous and we need them both. But one without the other leaves us broken, or aimless.

In any case, in this passage from the sixth chapter of Luke, Jesus is not asking us why we call Him “Savior.” He is asking: *Why do you call me “Lord”?*

My instant reaction, of course, is guilt and dismay. I do call Jesus “Lord.” I have for years. This is no recent conclusion or commitment for me. Why, then, am I aware of the tentative ways in which I follow and obey Him? For many of you, if I hear you right, being a Christian is duck soup. Cheerfully you are on the Christian Path or WAY, everything is matching up on the inside and on the outside, and, with only an occasional loss of focus or a momentary loss of concentration, you are expressing your faith and devotion everywhere you go and in everything you do.

This is not the way I experience the Christian Life. A person comes in to my office, for instance (actually a long string of them do), and they have a situation to deal with, a problem to face. They do not need or want me to take over their lives; they just want to reflect on things, check their perspective. They have some choices to make, and that is always scary on some level. But such moments are also more vulnerable than usual. It is a high privilege to talk about real life with real people. But nothing seems automatic to me. I am, among other things, supposed to represent my Lord to the best of my ability. So what about my own motives? Can I keep this person's true identity before me? Will any of my comments be slanted by what I think might be good for the church, instead of good for the person in front of me? There are invariably other people involved in the situation, and sometimes what I am hearing makes me angry toward them. Do I remember that Jesus loves them *too*, even if at the moment I am feeling anger or disapproval toward them?

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I do not get to go through many days that seem clear and simple. Probably you do not either; you just don't complain as much about it. In any case, I am so very grateful for the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Following and obeying always depend on getting extra help – getting guidance from the Holy Spirit on a steady basis. *It is necessary* for us as Christians to pray all day, every day. That is more than a mantra. That is a way of life. But it is only open to those of us who know that we do not have everything figured out on our own.

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So back to the question: *Why do you call me “Lord”?* The clear answer is that we have come to realize that Jesus is God's true Messiah – our rightful King. Jesus knows “the WAY” and leads the way into God's Kingdom. Therefore we call Him Lord and follow Him. Doing it perfectly is not implied or required, thank God. So we confess our blunders and our errors, receive forgiveness, and get back on the Path. Sometimes we call Him Lord *most* when we are least worthy to claim that we have allowed Him to lead us. But gratitude is far more important than perfection. And in fact, those who think they are nearly perfect are never truly grateful. What would they be grateful for?

Truly, there is no coercion on the Christian Path. We often think it would make it much easier if there were. Jesus always waits for us to decide if we really *want* to call Him Lord. Among other things, that is the huge dynamic that surrounds Holy Week. From Palm Sunday to Pentecost, all the approaches that we know would make the Christian Life successful and dominant on our planet are rejected. Jesus would rather die than force us to accept His leadership. That is at the very core of His story. Jesus will not coerce. Jesus waits for us to decide of our own free will whether or not we will call Him Lord. Most people do not – not really. All of us live through days when we are calling something else or someone else Lord.

What else *do* we call Lord? The list is long. The Book we call “the Bible” is often put in the place of our Lord. People we are trying to help can slip easily into the place of Lord, especially if we are determined to help them. A child, or our children. A friend, especially one who represents success in our business or the promise of closing a great deal. A guru, or a mentor. A career. Of course, we can care about all of these things and not put them in the place of Lord. But sometimes they slip into “lordship” when we are not looking – when we are not

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paying close attention on that level. It is one of Satan’s finest arts and one of Satan’s most subtle ploys.

Life is complex and sermons are short, so we do not have time to look closely at all the false Lords. (“Idols,” we used to call them.) In any case, one illustration will do, if we want to review the principles.

Why do you call me “Lord”? ME – Jesus. Not the Bible. The Bible has a lot of information about Jesus and about the history and traditions from which He came. That makes it exceedingly important to us. That does *not* turn it into our Lord. All over the land, in our time, there are people who treat the Bible as their Lord. It has no errors in it, they say. Therefore it is the source and reason for their beliefs. If the Bible says it, we can trust it without doubt or question – they say. We hear it over and over: “Jesus loves us, this we know – for the Bible tells us so.” We believe Jesus rose from the dead because the Bible says so. And if we should ever begin to doubt the Bible as the perfect “Word of God,” then we would lose all the important beliefs of the Christian Faith and cease to be Christians – meaning, cease to be God’s saved children. So then we will go to Hell. How scary to have to go to a place where we have always been: a place alienated from the will and purpose of God; a place where most people do not know the presence or the love or the grace or the forgiveness of God.

Actually, I believe in the Resurrection of Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit which the Resurrection makes clear and available to us. I believe it as much as anyone on this planet has ever believed it, and more than most. I will try to tell you a little about that on Easter Sunday. But I believe it because of *encounter* – not because of words on a page that have been written three and four languages away from ours; have been written by different authors with different perspectives; have been lost, gathered again, copied. That is all a fascinating story, but it does not turn the Bible into our Lord.

By the way, the Bible – that is, our holy scriptures – never thought or pretended that it was our God or our Lord. When Moses encounters the burning bush which sends him back to Egypt to free the Hebrew slaves, does he go because he was reading a book? Was he reading a book by the light of the burning bush? What book? There is no book. The covenant given on Mount Sinai (the Torah) is not given until *after* the slaves are freed: after Moses goes back to Egypt; after he confronts Pharaoh many times; after the slaves are freed, run for their lives, and cross the Reed Sea; after they walk across the wilderness and camp at

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the Holy Mountain. Whatever Moses experiences and trusts, it is not coming from a book. The books always come afterward – after real life and true encounters. As John James Audubon reminds us: “When the bird and the book disagree, always believe the bird.”

What about the apostles and Paul and the first *two centuries* of Christians who were praying together and trying to follow Jesus, scattered in various faith communities called “churches” in Israel, Syria, Turkey, Greece, and Rome? None of them were reading the New Testament! There were no printing presses yet, scrolls were expensive, and many of the early churches could not afford even one Old Testament scroll. But that’s beside the point. There was no New Testament to read – not yet! Pieces of it were being written, but nobody realized yet that those pieces would end up in a New Testament by the fourth century A.D. In short, they had to make do without the Book. They had to pray, support each other, worship together, and face incredible pressure and persecution together – without any Paper Pope; without any Book turned into an idol. They believed because they really believed, not because some book told them to. Jesus was their Lord and Savior because they experienced His presence within them – not because somebody wrote a book or a scroll telling them what they were supposed to believe. And, we might add, though far from perfection: for about two centuries, they did very well without the Book – even better, in many cases, than people do today *with* the Book. Yet all around us, we live with people who are telling us that the most important thing is the Book.

I study the Bible all the time. So do many of you. We need and (I hope) *want* to know what the early Christians thought about; what their customs were; how they experienced Jesus; what they thought He taught them: His life and death and Resurrection, and His return as Holy Spirit. I am grateful for the record. That does not mean I worship it, or think it will save me from error or tell me everything I need to know or believe in today’s world.

Sometimes it is the Bible itself that warns me against putting too much weight on the Bible – until I forget who my real Lord is. Do you ever read the Pastoral Epistles? (First and Second Timothy, and Titus.) Trying to mimic the voice of Paul, they try to contradict some of the most important things we learn from Paul (and from Jesus). When Paul gets “picked up” on the Damascus Road, he is busy arresting Christians, getting them incarcerated and killed. Did he ever make any mistakes? He even calls himself the chief of sinners. He is amazed

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at the grace and forgiveness of Jesus the Christ, and he is dumbfounded that the Holy Spirit wants to include him in the mission – as an Apostle to the Gentiles, no less. And his words of gratitude and praise ring in his letters to the Galatians, the Romans, the Corinthians, the Colossians, the Ephesians, etc.

But in the Pastoral Letters, we learn that nobody who has ever made any mistakes or with any known flaws shall ever be allowed to be a leader in the church. Out go Peter and Paul and Mark and everybody else who ever taught us anything worth knowing. Out go forgiveness and mercy and restoration and new chances. And despite Jesus and Paul honoring and accepting women on an equal basis with men (*“in Christ there is neither male nor female”* (Galatians 3:28)), in the Pastoral Letters we are supposed to go right back to the same old cultural biases and prejudices as if Jesus and Paul had never been among us: God does not care about women, except for their value to their husbands (and maybe to their children), so they should not expect equality with men; they should absorb all the bullying and abuse and degradation that some men hand out to them; they should smile and act “saintly” through it all. Then, after years and years of being subservient to a false god, maybe the real God will love and save them. Infuriating! Jesus came to *reverse* the curses of the Adam and Eve story – not to enforce or deify them.

Again and again Jesus taught us that if we cannot be faithful to Him inside the frames of our family and marriage vows, then we need to break those bonds and come with Him. *“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, even his own life, he cannot be a disciple of mine.”* (Luke 14:26) *“Truly I tell you: there is no one who has given up home, or wife, brothers, parents, or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not be repaid many times over in this age, and in the age to come have eternal life.”* (Luke 18:29)

Why do you call me “Lord”? We hope and pray that our own lives will never come to such crossroads. But sometimes they do. If and when they do, there is little doubt about who Jesus thinks is the real Lord. It is not always just a theoretical problem. Who is the Lord who leads us into Eternal Life? It is not an abusive husband – guaranteed. It is not a “Christian” friend who regurgitates simplistic formulas instead of trusting the Christian Path. Neither is it some preacher who is more interested in quoting Scripture than in helping people to follow and obey their true and living Lord.

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Trying to replace our Resurrected Lord – the One who lives in and among us all of our lives, and who has lived down through the ages from Pentecost until now – trying to replace Jesus with a book of words written on pages is one of the greatest calamities ever to befall the Christian church. And not the worst part of it, but one of the lesser curses, is the way this tends to shut down our thinking in ways that make it even harder for us to be obedient.

What makes that doubly sad, in my opinion, is that it hurts and misleads most the very people who most want to be faithful and obedient. What am I suggesting? When we think of the Bible as our inerrant authority instead of listening to the Lord who speaks to us in our prayers, it is hard not to get fixated on the words we read. We know better, perhaps, but it is insidious. Jesus never spoke in English. Obvious, of course. But most of us only read the New Testament in one of the many English translations, which do not themselves agree even with each other.

Jesus spoke Hebrew and Aramaic. He probably knew some Greek, but as far as we know He never taught in Greek. Yet the New Testament was *written* in Greek. So Jesus is our Lord, but we are always dealing with translations of what He said and taught. All translations are interpretations – approximations – that somebody thinks come pretty close to what was originally said or meant. So big deal! Just love each other and get on with it.

Great idea! Most of us are convinced, hopefully, that God loves us fully and completely and all the way. We do not always act like we believe it, but we are working on it. Meanwhile, what does it really mean to *love* each other? “*Faith, hope, and love abide, but the greatest of these is charity.*” What? Oh yes, some of us still remember the King James version of the Bible. “*Agape*” is the word used in Greek. “Charity” is probably a better translation than “love.” “With malice toward none – with *charity* for all.” Abraham Lincoln was more biblical than some people knew. “*A house divided against itself cannot stand.*” (Mark 3:25) Words to live by – even in *our* homes; even in *this* church.

But to be more specific: we are taught that we must even love our enemies. Of course, we all know what that means. Really? I think this is pure gibberish to many, many people. I should make my enemies my heartthrob? “Oh, my love, my darling – I’ve hungered for your touch.” (From “Unchained Melody,” lyrics by Hy Zaret.)

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Well, that is what love means – among other things – when I think of Mariana. I love Jesus. I want to love God with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength. But I do not think I am supposed to love my enemies that way. How am I supposed to know what loving my enemy really means? Yet if this is my Lord, instructing me to love my enemies, then this is no longer a parlor game. This is a direct instruction from the One I am sworn to obey. So I really do need to know.

Knowing the word in Greek does not solve all my problems. It just warns me to be careful about getting too rigid, too literal, too confident. How close the translation comes to what Jesus really intends, I will never know for sure. I sincerely doubt that Jesus intends the gibberish I frequently hear from other Christians. In Greek the passage reads “*agapao*.” I must *agapao* my enemies: be charitable; have some regard and respect for them. Which of course leaves me asking the Spirit – in each case, in each instance – what do you really want from me in this situation, with this particular person?

Well, clearly I have more enemies than most of you have, so this is no doubt a bigger issue for me than it is for you. Nevertheless, I bring it up to illustrate the point. Having a true and living Lord is a wonderful, beautiful, but sometimes troubling WAY of LIFE. It is, however, far superior to becoming enslaved to words on a page that have no flexibility and have no awareness or concern for real life, in real situations. The Bible can be wonderful. But it reminds us that “*the word became flesh, and now dwells among us.*” The true WORD is a Living WORD. And the Book cannot keep up with the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord – who is our true Lord.