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## *Isn't Jesus Just Like All the Other Religious Leaders?*

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**T**here's something appealing about equality and fairness. And there's something repulsive about inequality and exclusivity. Whether it's a claim of one race's supremacy, one country's preeminence, or one person's superiority, most of us reject the notion of one entity being better than others.

And so, given our bias toward fairness, many people reject a core Christian belief - that Jesus is better than all other religions' leaders. In fact, Christians claim something even more extreme - that Jesus is the only way to God.

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if His words shock today.*

Much of the difficulty stems from the things Jesus said about Himself. He's the one who has started this difficult conversation. If you read any of the first four books of the New Testament, the Gospel according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, you run up against some outlandish things Jesus said. He regularly shocked people in His own time. We shouldn't be surprised if His words shock us today.

Consider just a few of these statements:

- He claimed He existed before Abraham (who had lived hundreds of years before him). (John 8:58)
- He told His followers He would always exist. (Matthew 28:20)
- He called Himself "The Lord of the Sabbath" and "The Son of Man" (titles His Jewish hearers would recognize as terms for the promised Messiah). (Matthew 12:8)
- He said He had the authority and ability to forgive sins. (Mark 2:5)
- He called Himself "The resurrection and the life," "the way, the truth, and the life" and "the bread of life". (John 11:25; John 14:6; John 6:35)
- In one seemingly bizarre moment, He claimed to have seen Satan fall, an event the Bible says occurred before the creation of the human race. (Luke 10:18)



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He was the one who said, “No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6) Perhaps His most audacious claim may have been when He used a sacred name for God, the Hebrew term for “I am” to refer to Himself. Nothing could have been more offensive to the Jewish leaders who heard Him. And in fact, they did understand Him to be claiming to be God. That’s why they picked up stones to kill Him for this kind of blasphemy. (John 8:58-59) When He claimed to be able to forgive sins, they reasonably responded, “Why does this fellow talk like that?... Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mark 2:5-7)

It’s hard to improve upon C. S. Lewis’s insight about all this. Although a skeptic and an atheist for over 30 years, Lewis had to admit Jesus’ claims were compelling. Here’s how he put it:

“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: ‘I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.’ That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.” (C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Geoffrey Bliss, 1952; this edition, HarperCollins, 1980), p. 52)

If we are going to engage with the exclusive claims of Christianity, we really need to wrestle with Jesus Himself. Some people say, “I like Jesus because He taught a lot about love. But I can’t believe those extreme things Christians say about Him.” People who say things like this need to consider they may not have really interacted with the actual Jesus, the one written about in the New Testament.

If we consider what Jesus actually said, His claims, remarkable as they are, make sense. If the God who created everything and could do anything wanted to take on human flesh, that wouldn’t be beyond His skill set. If He did, the kinds of things Jesus said about Himself would fit perfectly with what we know about God from the Hebrew Scriptures - He’s eternal, powerful, all-knowing, and the only one qualified to forgive sins.

Further, if Jesus was different than other religious leaders (note that Mohammad, Buddha, and others never claimed to be God), the faith He proclaimed would be different than other systems of belief. And that is exactly what we find when we read the New Testament.

Other religions prescribe laws to keep to reach God. Jesus said no one could do that! But He would take our place in fulfilling God’s law. Only a perfect God could offer such a provision. Only a gracious God would make that sacrifice.

That’s why Jesus could make this bold and liberating invitation: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28)

