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# What Shall We Do With Jesus?

By  
HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK, D.D.

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## WHAT SHALL WE DO WITH JESUS?\*

HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK

I raise with you this morning a question which Pilate raised long ago in the Prætorium when he faced Jesus and his accusers. Matthew tells us of it in his 27th chapter and the 22d verse. "What shall I do?" said Pilate. "What shall I do unto Jesus who is called Christ?"

You will note from the beginning that this question, when Pilate asked it, was not theoretical; it was urgently practical and Pilate raised it only because it had to be answered one way or another. They had to do something with Jesus. Jesus had forced himself upon his people's decision as an unavoidable issue. They would have been glad to have avoided it. They did not want to be bothered by facing him, deciding about him, and doing something with him, even though they did have the power to be rid of him by the swift and summary method of the cross. But Jesus could not be evaded. His life, his teaching, his courage, his attack upon the paganism of his time and the degeneracy of the popular religion made him a matter of forced decision. And when at last he rode into Jerusalem amid the acclamations of the people, when he cleared the temple of the money-changers and threw down the gauntlet to the temple ring and, so bearding the rulers of the people in their capital city, was haled before the court of Pilate, this forced decision was obvious. They had to do something with him. What should they do with Jesus?

Nearly sixty generations have passed since then, and so far from that question becoming less acute and urgent, I think it is much more imperious. We cannot get away from it now. When first they asked that question, only a small group of men in Jerusalem, surrounded by their henchmen and hangers-on, were concerned with it. It worried them. They did not want to decide it but something had to be done, and they did it. All the world

\*Scripture Lessons: Psalm 32:1-7 and Matthew 16:13-25.

beside, however, was ignorant of the very existence of the question: what should be done with Jesus? That is not true any longer. That question has run out into all the earth, and its circuit unto the ends of it, and there is nothing hid from the heat thereof. In a way that never could have been foreseen Jesus has gone on making of himself an unavoidable issue.

Read the great literature of the race and you cannot escape the ideas of Jesus; try to solve the fundamental problems of our civilization and you find yourself dealing with the principles of Jesus; in your own conscience endeavor to settle a question of right and wrong and you find yourself confronting his ideals. The fact is that there is not a day in our lives when we do not have to do something with him. Let us see if that is not true.

In the first place, phrase the question this way: what shall I do with Jesus as a scientific fact? For he is that—a fact, a life which has actually been lived on this planet and which we must take into consideration when we try to build a philosophy of life. Chesterton once suggested that if we had been told in advance of some heroic lives which actually have been lived we would have thought them utterly impossible. If some one had told us in advance of the career of Admiral Nelson, with its untoward beginnings, until on the deck of his flagship at Trafalgar he fell on death just when he had won the greatest naval victory of all history and had saved his nation's life, we would have thought of it as an incredible tale. Nevertheless it happened. Chesterton's thesis is important. There is something incredible about the greatest lives, so that if some one in advance had told us the story of Chinese Gordon or of Adoniram Judson or of Abraham Lincoln it would have seemed impossible. But of all the astounding careers with which we have to deal, where is there anything comparable with Christ's? If some one had told us in advance that some day a baby would be born in a cattle shed, be brought up in a carpenter's home, working at the household trade until he was a full-grown man, that then he would teach his people for a few months, until he died at thirty-three; that he would raise no armies, organize no institutions, write no books, hold no office; that he would be poor and unbefriended, called crazy by his fam-

ily, called a heretic by his church, called a traitor by his nation, and that at last he would be dragged outside the walls of the city which he loved and would be crucified as a felon between thieves: and if anybody had told us that two thousand years afterward there would not be a land on earth where men and women were not gladly laying down their lives for the privilege of telling people about him; that two thousand years afterward in the happiest season of the year countless people would be celebrating his coming and innumerable children would be singing songs about his birthday; if any one had told us that a man like George Bernard Shaw, rebellious, cynical, skeptical, twenty centuries afterward would be saying, "I am ready to admit that after contemplating the world and human nature for nearly sixty years, I see no way out of the world's misery but the way which would have been found by Christ's will if he had undertaken the work of a practical statesman," and that poets and seers like Browning would be lifting up their hearts on high to sing of him:

"The very God! think, Abid; dost thou think?  
So, the All-Great, were the All-loving too"—

I say, if anybody had told you that in advance it would have seemed impossible. But it is true; it actually has happened; the fact is here. It is the most considerable fact that ever took place on this planet. I do not see how you are going to avoid it. You have got to do something with the fact of Christ.

Just such considerations many people neglect when they talk about religion as the mere effulgence of our aspirations and dreams without facts to rest upon. Situated on Lake Lucerne in Switzerland, surrounded by sparkling water and snow-clad mountains, is the famous chapel dedicated to William Tell. Of course, the critics have long since discounted the facts which the chapel is supposed to commemorate. But it is beautiful and there are many lovely things in life anyway that are largely fairy tales. People therefore go to the chapel still and there indulge their fancies or worship at the little shrine. So too, many people think about religion. They consider it the nebulous result of our fancies and not the solid result of our facts, a castle in Spain all the more



beautiful because it is so built by wish and dream and not by actuality. Moreover, people have tried to think that they can get on with that kind of religion, that they can refresh and cheer themselves with a faith that is a comfortable dream. But it will not do. Multitudes of people know today that it will not do. When great sorrows crash into the hearts of men, when temptations shake us like earthquakes until the foundation-stones are loosed, when problems face us hard to meet and uncertain of solution, we cannot stay our souls upon a vague religion of aspiration. A strong tree cannot root itself in a fog-bank. The greatest need of this generation is a religion which honestly and whole-heartedly men and women can believe to be true.

It is worth while insisting then that the Christian Gospel not only deals with facts, but among many others deals with the most amazing fact that ever happened on this planet—the fact of Christ. Just here emerges something which seems to me most strange. You will find men who call themselves scientists and who pride themselves on sticking to the facts, and yet who often will interpret the word “fact” in such a way as to shut out from their consideration the major facts of human experience and life. They see that rocks are facts and they will build from them the science of geology. They see that stars are facts and they will induce from these the science of astronomy. They know that fossils are facts and from them they will read you a whole chapter of the history of the earth. But after all this building of inductions from physical facts, they will base nothing on the most dominant, towering, influential fact in human history. A life that has changed the whole calendar so that we date everything from the time he came—that ought to be a considerable fact. A life that after sixty generations of searching investigation makes a cautious and critical mind like Matthew Arnold say, “Nothing will do, except righteousness; and no other conception of righteousness will do, except Christ’s conception of it”—that ought to be a considerable fact. But some men so obsess themselves with sub-human facts, quantitative, physical facts, that they neglect as a basis for induction the major facts of man’s experience. They base immense conclusions on the heavenly bodies; they base no conclusions on

the heavenly character. The primary trouble with that kind of science is not that it is not religious enough. The primary trouble with that kind of science is that it is not scientific enough.

If there is a young man here this morning priding himself on being scientific, saying that he will stick by the facts, I dare say there is nothing that we would rather have him do than stick by the facts,—only let him stick by all the facts, and, above all, stick by the supreme facts. Geology from the rocks, astronomy from the stars, nothing from Christ—how will you defend that? Even when Robinson Crusoe on his island saw a solitary footprint in the sand, he guessed something from it. It was a very little thing, but what immense significance it had for him upon a lonely island to find a footprint there! And do you mean that on this wandering island in the sky you can watch the life of the Master and its effect upon humanity and guess nothing from it? Must you not at least suspect that that spiritual life of his is the revelation of a spiritual world, that that footprint means that God himself has been walking here?

For myself it seems perfectly plain what in all honesty I must do with the fact of Christ. I must put it in the center of my philosophy of life. I must put the greatest fact in the greatest place. Having long since been taught to treat even little facts with profound respect, to take up a poor fossil of a trilobite and read in it a whole chapter of the world's history, how can I face Christ and not believe that he means something revelatory about reality? There is no use telling me that the fact of Christ has happened in a universe where there is no God! Shall a man read the story of the earth in a trilobite and not see the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ? Well, what will *you* do with him? What will you do with Jesus as a scientific fact?

Or phrase the question in another way: what will you do with Jesus as an ethical teacher? You have got to do something with him. It is too late in the day to think ethically without reference to him. If you were a lawyer, it never would occur to you that you could think legally without reference to the common law. By no tour de force could you possibly do that. The com-

mon law has gotten into the legal sub-consciousness of the race. If some young lawyer with gay originality should make up his mind to be fancy free of the common law, not to bother to study it at all, but to go his own sweet way, he could not really be free of the common law. The very air he breathes is permeated with it. The only way in which conceivably anybody could ever be independent of the common law would be first to know it thoroughly and then deliberately to break away from it. As Ellen Terry said about acting, "Before you can be eccentric you must know where the circle is." Just so! And in legal thinking the circle is the common law.

So no one can think about right and wrong, about goodness and duty, without reference to Jesus. Consider, for example, forgiveness of one's enemies. That is one of the Master's specialties. Of course, many had thought of it before him. It flames up radiantly in many lands and many religions, but none ever took it as he did and put it in the forefront, making it the very touchstone and standard of right living, that a man should love his enemies and do them good. And of all the ideals that seem too impractical ever to be influential, is there another ideal like that? The Graeco-Roman world into which the Gospel went did not have that ideal. Cicero was one of the noblest Romans of them all and he had an enemy called Clodius. Clodius fell at the battle of Bovillae. That was one of the happiest days in Cicero's life. He was so unabashed in his joy that he started dating letters from the day on which his enemy fell. We have one of those letters yet with this date upon it: "560th day after Bovillae." No one of us stands out above the moral average of our time as Cicero did above his, but no one of us could do that without being ashamed of himself. Something has happened to the ethical ideals of the race.

When you note, moreover, our prophets and seers trying to draw the portrait of an ideal character, you will see that they never can leave out this capacity to forgive enemies. It did not use to be that way. Plato could not have put that in. The fairest character that Browning ever drew was Pompilia, in *The Ring and the Book*, and here is her crowning grace: that, cruelly



wronged by Guido, she kept unspoiled to the end her willingness to pardon if the way would open and the pardon help. As for Tennyson, he tried to draw King Arthur as nobly as he could and the climax comes when, cruelly wronged by Guinevere, his queen, he stands in the nunnery and sees her lying there before him penitent upon the floor:

“Thou hast not made my life so sweet to me,  
That I the King should greatly care to live;  
For thou hast spoilt the purpose of my life.

Yet think not that I come to urge thy crimes,  
I did not come to curse thee, Guinevere,  
I, whose vast pity almost makes me die  
To see thee, laying there thy golden head,  
My pride in happier summers, at my feet.

And all is past, the sin is sinn'd, and I,  
Lo! I forgive thee, as Eternal God  
Forgives.”

You see, something has happened to the ethical ideals of the race.

Tomorrow you may be wronged by an enemy and, smarting under the mistreatment, you may want vindictively to get even with him, and perhaps you will do it. Maybe you will! But of one thing I am certain: you will not be able at this late date to do it with a perfectly clear conscience. There in the background of your mind, in spite of yourself, will be the disturbing figure of one who suffered a worse mistreatment than you will ever suffer, and who even on the cross said, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” You see, you must deal with him. You cannot help it.

Strange, is it not? that that man of Nazareth after all these centuries should so challenge the conscience of the world. When first they put that cross upon his back and he stumbled down the narrow and ill-smelling lanes of Jerusalem amid the gaping, mocking crowds, out toward Golgotha, who ever would have supposed that a generation twenty centuries unborn, whenever it tried to settle the deepest questions of right or wrong, would have to accept or deny him? Yet that is the fact. Yes! again, as in the

old Prætorium, the Pilates of this world, the rulers and governors, the politicians and diplomats, the representatives of Cæsar, have Jesus on their hands. They have got to do something with him. For these many generations he has been telling them that violence and force will never work, that they who take the sword will perish by it, but they would not believe it. Through all these centuries he has been saying, "Blessed are the peacemakers; for they shall be called sons of God," but they would have none of it. For all these generations he has been telling them that in the long run only brotherhood and good-will and co-operation and unselfishness will ever really work and they have laughed him to scorn and cried, "Behold, this dreamer cometh." And now the crisis of our western civilization is upon us and is he a dreamer? Upon the contrary, has not the whole world played the fool, and are we not now living in the suburbs of perdition because of it?

Who will now say that violence and force will work? Where have they worked? History is a long story of proud and overbearing empires founded on force and glorying in imperialistic conquest, which have risen to boast themselves a little hour and then irretrievably have fallen into the dust. Some of you will remember Shelley's sonnet called "Ozymandias of Egypt," where a traveler from a distant land describes to the poet how the fallen statue of the mighty king lies half buried in the desert sand. Sings Shelley:

"And on the pedestal these words appear:  
 'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
 Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!  
 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
 Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,  
 The lone and level sands stretch far away.'"

How strong Ozymandias seemed to himself when he was here! Yet he was not strong, but weak. And weak too is our western world because of the very things we counted on to make it strong: conquest, imperialism, oppression, war. And as today one hears the politicians and governors of the world discussing what they will do to escape the hell that threatens, the old scene in the Prætorium recreates itself. It is Christ before Pilate. What will

they do with him? For unless they choose him, his methods, his principles, his ways, somebody will yet sing above the ruins of our western world like Shelley over Ozymandias. So crucial is that question that cannot be escaped: what shall I do with Jesus the ethical teacher?

Just once more, let us rephrase the question! What shall I do with Jesus the personal savior? It is said that at the time of the French Revolution, when all Paris went wild, a riotous mob, the riffraff and scum of the populace, swept through the Tuileries on loot and pillage bent. They poured down one of the long corridors, violently burst open the opposing door and tumbled into the room beyond. And there on the opposite wall of the room was a great picture of the crucifixion. They say that the wild mob became suddenly quiet, that those who had hats on took them off, and a few knelt, that the leaders turned the picture to the wall until the cross was hidden. Then the crowd stole out and shut the door and broke loose again. Moreover, we know that had we been there we should have felt the same. For this is the peculiarity of Christ and in particular of Christ upon the cross, that you cannot come close to him without feeling him touch your conscience.

Tomorrow night I expect to see Hamlet played and I know that I shall enjoy it greatly. Once more the wonderful old drama will unroll its plot and familiar passages will charm the ear and delight the mind and we shall feel again how supreme a dramatist Shakespeare is. But I do not expect to be chastened in conscience. I do not expect to have a tussle with my soul. I shall not go home saying "God be merciful to me a sinner." That kind of greatness does not belong to Shakespeare, but it does to Christ. I cannot stand before him and his cross without having a tussle with my soul.

Nor is the reason difficult to see. We may talk as we will about living our life rationally on the basis of right principles, but as a matter of fact the great forces in our lives are not abstract ideas, but people. Meetings with people are the turning points in our lives. Oliver Wendell Holmes, for example, was an unusually intelligent young man and when he came to decide so important a

question as his life's vocation you might have expected him to decide it rationally. But he didn't. He tells us that he didn't. He says that he thought of being a minister but then he met a minister, a most unlovely sort of man. "He talked like an undertaker," said Holmes. And Holmes made up his mind that he would not be a minister. That was not rational, but it was very human. For good or ill, it is people who change our lives—and of all the people we ever meet who influence us most, none compares with somebody who is bearing a sacrifice on our account.

Vicarious sacrifice is the most sobering and impressive fact in human life. Once in a while you meet somebody who says that he does not believe in vicarious sacrifice. That is strange! Where has he been living these last few years? The boys who died in war, the girls who lost their lovers overseas, had not by their iniquity made the ancient madness of the world which piled up this accumulated consequence of agony. They took on their young shoulders a burden that their sin had not made. That is vicarious sacrifice and it is the most impressive fact in human life. Not believe in vicarious sacrifice? But do we not know the story of Livingstone, who never had made Africa the hell-hole of misery it was but who voluntarily took on his life that ancient curse, or of Father Damien, who never had been a leper and never had made anyone else a leper, but who voluntarily took on himself the bitterness of that lamentable disease, or of Florence Nightingale, who never had wounded anybody, but who of her free will took on herself the burden of wounded men lying on the battlefield? That is vicarious sacrifice and it is the most sobering and impressive fact in human life. We do not believe in vicarious sacrifice? But have we never had a home? As one looks back to his boyhood there are some things he does not easily forget. To have been disobedient, to have spoken resentfully when he was rebuked, and to have stormed in anger from the room—if that were all we might forget it. But by and by to steal back to the closed door, as I did once, to hear my mother sobbing because of me—that is different. She was bearing on her heart the burden of my disobedience and that is the most sobering thing in human life. Surely, we understand that. We understand why even that wild, revolu-



tionary mob could not break loose again until they had turned the cross to the wall and shut the door.

And because there are some people who never have been able to do that, to whom the cross has been an unavoidable issue in life, Christian history has been filled with an amazing kind of life story. The life story begins with folks making a poor start, smirched by sin, narrowed by selfishness, spoiled by aimlessness, embittered by trouble—a very poor beginning. But by and by see them again and they are making a great ending. It is amazing that such poor beginnings can come to such magnificent conclusions. And if you ask the secret, here it is: they have met somebody. They have met somebody bearing a sacrifice on their behalf. They have met Christ on the cross and have seen there revealed an eternal mercy that never can shake the burden off until the sins of men are cleansed away.

I wish that there were some one here this morning who would meet him in that vital fashion. Scientific fact, yes, the greatest fact the human mind has ever dealt with; ethical teacher, yes, a teacher whose principles we will follow or else perish; but deeper than that, a personal savior whom to meet, with whom to fall in love, by whom to be chastened, melted, subdued, forgiven, empowered, has been the beginning of the noblest living that this world has ever seen. What will *ye* do with Jesus, called the Christ?

## PRAYER

Eternal God, our Father, we pray to Thee against our cowardice, against our unwillingness to face the supreme fact, against our shrinking from looking Jesus Christ in the face. Fairest among ten thousand and the one altogether beautiful, the best gift that God ever gave to men, help us, we beseech Thee, to put him in the center of our lives, of our thinking, of our love, of our purpose, and grant that because we have worshiped here today, more than ever before, Christ may be all and in all to us. AMEN.