

Interview with Philip Yancey

The Jesus I Never Knew Leader's Guide (ISBN 0310224322)

Zondervan: What is the most common misconception people have of Jesus?

Yancey: Oh, my, how do I begin to answer that? The reason I called my book *The Jesus I Never Knew* is that I had grown up with a multitude of misconceptions of Jesus. I saw him as a nice but bland person, a "Captain Kangaroo with a beard," as I say in the book. In the U.S., we tend to have that kind of sentimental image of Jesus. Just look at the portrayals of him in most Hollywood films, for example. If I had to narrow the field down to one misconception, I would say that most people have a hard time envisioning him as a real human being, the kind you could converse with, let alone party with. We still see this man with a halo floating through life, and that is definitely not the depiction of the Gospels. Although I certainly appreciate what Mel Gibson attempted to do in *The Passion*, one weakness to me was that it didn't portray a person you would want to forsake everything to follow. Jesus had that effect on people. He was mysterious, off-putting at times, fierce, and yet somehow appealed to the deepest level of human attraction.

Zondervan: What makes calling Jesus a "great teacher," like many non-Christians do, rather senseless?

Yancey: I agree that Jesus was a great teacher, though not merely a great teacher. In recent years, scholars have found that most of what Jesus said reflected what other rabbis of that era were saying. Jesus would not have had the impact on history he has had merely because of his teaching skills. And, frankly, if you take a look at what he said, especially in the Gospel of John, it would be hard to come to terms with him as a teacher. He predicted the future, forgave sins, prophesied that he could destroy the temple in three days, promised people he would see them in Paradise, applied Old Testament prophecies to himself. He said things like, "If you've seen me, you've seen God the Father." Imagine Buddha or Mohammed making such an outlandish claim. That creates a problem. If he is not the Son of God, can we take him seriously at all? And yet even his harshest critics admire his moral teaching. Jesus presents a whole package, and it's hard to accept one part of the package--his teaching, for example--without having to come to terms with the rest.

Zondervan: How is Genesis 3 to Revelation 22 like Jesus' parable of the prodigal son?

Yancey: I would summarize the "plot" of the Bible as "God getting his family back." God chose a slow, rather circuitous way to accomplish that goal. First he started with one family, Abraham's family, then a tribe, then a nation, and finally out of that nation brought forth a Messiah for the entire world. The goal all along, as Jesus declared: "God was not willing that any should perish." Isn't that the theme of the prodigal son story? As I mention, the real hero of that story is not the son but the father. Jesus told us the story to describe the unfathomable love of a forgiving father. What is true of one son in one family gives a picture of what is true of God's love for the entire world--as Jesus would later demonstrate in the most graphic way possible.