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Are we more intent on being nice than on being Christlike?

IF SINNERS WERE HIS FRIENDS, WHO WERE HIS ENEMIES?

by Eddy Hall

I've been wondering about something lately. If Jesus lived in North America today, who would be his friends? Who would be his enemies?

Well, the "friends" part of that question should be easy. Jesus would spend most of his time hanging out with us Christians, right? He would be in church every Sunday (in a church of my denomination, most likely), attend the mid-week service, and serve on two or three committees. He would be the model church member.

Or maybe not exactly. After all, since he is Jesus, perhaps he would be the senior pastor of the church, not just a member. And since he is Jesus, it probably wouldn't be long before it would be the biggest church in the world--a million members, two million--who knows where it would stop? And what kind of a building complex would it take to accommodate that kind of congregation? It boggles the mind. Can you imagine the number of tourists (or perhaps we should call them pilgrims) who would descend on the church campus every day? It would be awesome!

Or maybe he wouldn't want to be tied down to one church. After all, Jesus was a traveling preacher. So maybe he would become the most in-demand speaker ever, speaking at Christian conferences throughout the world, pulling down \$100,000 for each speaking engagement, then donating the money to charity. He'd have the top-rated TV and radio shows of all time.

Who would his friends be? He'd probably play golf with Methodist bishops and Presbyterian moderators and Nazarene general superintendents and at least once a year with the pope. (Well, considering the pope's age, he might have to settle for backgammon that day.)

And who would have the most to lose by Jesus' appearing on the scene? Well, that's not too hard to figure out either, is it? Pornographers and gangbangers.

Drug pushers and addicts. Pimps and prostitutes. Anyone who makes a living from the sin industry. Because Jesus hates sin and he has the clout to do something about it. If Jesus shows up, these folks are in trouble. Yes, Jesus would make enemies, and they would deserve every bit of whatever he decided to dish out.

There's just one thing wrong with this picture: it has nothing to do with the Jesus we see in the Gospels.

The Jesus we see in the Gospels spent so much time hanging out with hookers and crooks and boozers that his enemies tagged him "a friend of sinners," but it didn't faze him. He just kept right on hanging out with the same kind of folk. He didn't leave these friends in their sin-made messes, of course. He forgave their sins and invited them into his community of people who were being made new.

Jesus also called the twelve disciples his friends. Some of these had been devout Jews before Jesus showed up, but even these twelve included some of his friends of the more shady variety-- Matthew the tax collector (who had probably made most of his living through extortion and embezzlement) and a radical anarchist named Simon the Zealot. And Judas Iscariot may have been a member of a group that advocated lawless violence. Among the women whom Jesus counted as close friends, Mary Magdalene had had seven demons.

These were Jesus' friends, and those who objected to his choice of friends became his enemies. Simon the Pharisee was so intrigued with Jesus' teaching that he invited Jesus home for dinner. During the meal, a prostitute showed up and anointed Jesus' feet with perfume. Simon gave Jesus the benefit of the doubt, assuming he didn't know who this woman was. As it turned out, though, not only did Jesus know, but he felt honored, not scandalized, by her devotion. We're not told, but chances are, that was the last time Simon had Jesus over for dinner. It didn't take many events like that to earn Jesus the utter contempt and undying hostility of the Pharisees. Jesus, for all his talk of God, didn't keep his distance from sinners. In fact, he seemed to relish immersing himself in the lives of the riffraff. He felt right at home there. The only thing was, to him they weren't riffraff. They were people with faces and histories and names, like Matthew and Zacchaeus and Mary and Joanna. They were his friends.

Jesus didn't take kindly to people who disrespected his friends. Which is why, when the Pharisees got on Jesus' case, Jesus returned the favor. The Pharisees were the biblically correct religious leaders, the ones who made it their job to make sure people obeyed the Law (or heard about it if they didn't). The Pharisees were leading the charge in the culture wars of their day, trying to

beat back the forces of sexual immorality and drunkenness and irreligiosity. To keep themselves and their families safe from the corrupting influence of these sinners, they built high walls of cultural separation between themselves and these lowlifes, and waged their wars from the tops of these fortress walls.

When these religious hotshots took potshots at his friends, Jesus was outraged. He called the Pharisees hypocrites. He called them snakes. He called them children of the devil. And he did it to their faces. In public.

Which takes me back to what I was wondering about in the first place. If Jesus were living in North America today, who would be his friends? Who would be his enemies? His friends, I have no doubt, would be those most aware they needed him. Yes, we would see Jesus in the bars and brothels,

but he wouldn't be there to wave protest signs or point fingers; he would be there to make friends. That's where he would find his kind of people.

And, yes, we would find him speaking in churches--as long as they would let him. After all, he loved to teach in synagogues. But it wasn't to give pep talks; it was to announce the inbreaking of the radical reign of God and, in many cases, to call the religious folk to repent. Asking self-righteous religious folk to repent of their religion and to enter the kingdom didn't set well in most synagogues. Chances are it wouldn't go over much better in churches. Because Jesus wouldn't bless the status quo or cheerlead our culture wars; he would call us to radical conversion. He would tell us to tear down the walls we've built around ourselves to keep the world from contaminating us. He would call us to immerse ourselves in society, to fall in love with sinners. He would call us to do justice and love mercy. And if we refused to change our ways, he would call us names.

Speakers like that don't get invited back a lot. And this raises for me the most disturbing question of all. If that is what Jesus said and did, and I am supposed to be like Jesus, who should my friends be? Who should my enemies be? Whom should I be embracing? Whom should I be confronting? When shots are fired in the culture wars, should I be up on the wall shooting down? Or outside the walls taking the shots aimed at my "unsavory" friends.

But, wait, calling religious leaders names wouldn't be polite! That wouldn't be nice!

Which is exactly what Jesus' disciples thought. One time "the disciples came to him and asked, 'Do you realize you offended the Pharisees by what you just said?'" (Matt. 15:12). But Jesus knew exactly what he was doing. He wasn't

trying to be nice. He was trying to unmask the self-righteous Pharisees so people would know not to follow them. Jesus didn't blast the Pharisees just because they were wrong; he exposed them because they were leading people down a life-destroying dead end. Jesus so wanted people to be free to say yes to the gospel that he felt compelled to confront head on this distorted version of God's message that drove people away from God rather than inviting them to the party.

In our culture, as in Jesus', the greatest obstacle to people's being able to embrace the gospel isn't secularism or evolution or postmodernism. It's not crime or pornography or drugs. It's the religious people who "crush people beneath impossible religious demands" (Luke 11:46), those who are super careful to keep the fine print of the law while ignoring the headlines of justice, mercy, and faith (Matt. 23:23). It's Christians who condemn sinners rather than befriending them. Christians who are more concerned about avoiding contamination than they are about understanding and loving hurting people right where they are.

Though the implications make me squirm, I'm forced to conclude that if Jesus lived in my culture, he would be just as quick to take on modern-day Pharisees as he was to blast those of his day. Watching law-abiding Christians isolating themselves in their holy huddles while keeping a safe distance from the people he was proud to call his friends, Jesus wouldn't sit quietly. He wouldn't be nice.

He would speak out. He would point fingers. He would call people names. Even if it got him killed.

Just how committed am I to being like Jesus?

Scripture quotations are from the New Living Translation.