

THOMAS
CHRISTIANSON

THE
UNREASONABLE

JESUS

BECOMING THE PERSON
HE MADE YOU TO BE



JESUS-CENTERED



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INTRODUCTION

As sermons go, the one Jesus delivers from the mount ranks right up there. Big crowd, big impact, quoted like crazy. But when you actually read what he says, a lot of it seems so...unreasonable. Is Jesus *serious* about this stuff?

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INTRODUCTION

Just about everybody likes Jesus.

My Jewish friends say he's a great teacher. My Muslim buddies read about Jesus in the Quran and esteem him highly as a prophet. A quote attributed to the famous Hindu believer Gandhi says, "I like your Christ; I do not like your Christians."¹

Politicians often portray themselves as Jesus' BFF to win votes. A wide range of Christian groups and denominations point to themselves as the people who *really* understand Jesus.

Jesus shows up in movies. You'll find him on jewelry, bumper stickers, and tattoos. And I've long ago quit counting all the songs written to, for, and about Jesus.

That's all great. I'm a big fan of Jesus.

But I have a question: Would he be as popular if we actually read what he says? *All* the stuff he says?

For example:

"Cut off your hand and gouge out your eye if they cause you to sin."

"Eat my flesh and drink my blood."

"Being angry and insulting someone is as bad as committing murder."

"Never seek revenge."

"Love your enemy."

Those aren't the quotes that end up on bumper stickers because...well, they're completely unreasonable. Were someone other than Jesus to say those things to me, I'd nod slowly while backing out of the room.

But Jesus says them...and appears to mean them...and still we claim him for our own.

So how does he pull it off?

I think, quite simply, we choose to ignore Jesus when he says anything too outrageous or unreasonable. We treat him like a crazy, rich uncle, smiling at his insanity because we don't want to get cut out of the will.

After all, we Christians believe it's through Jesus that we gain eternal life. With that kind of payoff, I can look the other way when he's being a little nutty.

And yet...

What if ignoring the unreasonable stuff means we're missing out on truly knowing Jesus, having a more authentic friendship with him?

What if "Unreasonable Jesus" is just as real as "Compassionate Jesus" and "Suffering Savior Jesus" and "Sweet Baby in the Manger Jesus"?

What if those "unreasonable" comments lead us to a healthier life—emotionally, spiritually, and relationally?

1 Gandhi actually said, "First, I would suggest that all of you Christians...must begin to live more like Jesus Christ." E. Stanley Jones, *Mahatma Gandhi: An Interpretation* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1948), 51.

What if Jesus asks us to grapple with those hard truths because that's one place we'll experience the transformation he's wanting to accomplish in us?

The Sermon on the Mount is one of the best places to meet Unreasonable Jesus and see him catch everybody—religious leaders and average people alike—completely off guard.

You've heard the sermon and read it in the Bible. But to get the full impact of what Jesus says, it helps to be mindful of where Jesus was and who was around him. Let me paint that picture for you.

It's at the front end of Jesus' ministry, and his popularity is skyrocketing. He's been teaching in area synagogues, traveling around the region of Galilee, and the word's out: If you're diseased, paralyzed, or demon-possessed, and you can make it to Jesus, he'll heal you. No charge.

So life's become a circus. Crowds have arrived, mobs of people either hoping for healing or eager to see the show. People elbow one another to get close to Jesus, the better to see and hear him or, hopefully, get a healing touch.

And as "Jesus fever" ramps up, Jesus hikes up a mountainside—the closest thing to picking up a microphone that existed at the time—finds a good place to sit down, and begins to talk.

The crowd listens intently, eager to hear what he has to say, sure they won't be bored. And they're not wrong, because Jesus says things they've never heard from a rabbi before. From *anyone* before, ever.

Those are the words we're going to explore together, considering what Jesus' words tell us about him...and about ourselves.

And we'll ask a dangerous question: *What if we actually do what he tells us to do?* Where do we start? How will it look? What will happen?

I'll share stories and practical insights from my journey of attempting to take Jesus' sermon seriously. And I'm inviting you to join Jesus in crafting new stories in your life as the two of you move along your journey together.

Jesus' words give us glimpses of the people he's calling us to become. And they show us how far we are from fully arriving.

But that's okay. We're on our way...together.

You and me.

Taking steps of faith.

Letting Jesus transform our lives.

A quick note: Jesus' sermon includes the "Beatitudes," that list of "blessed are's" that has kept theologians busy for centuries. And one can argue that expecting anyone to be happy about suffering because someday she'll inherit the earth is unreasonable in the extreme.

But Unreasonable Jesus was just getting warmed up. The Beatitudes were just the opening notes of his symphony.

That's why we're diving in at Matthew 5:13, when Jesus pushes past his opening salvo to dig deeper into the topics he wants his audience to consider.

So strap in.

We're about to meet the Jesus who's often ignored: the Unreasonable Jesus.



Chapter 1

SALT AND LIGHT

You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor? Can you make it salty again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless.

You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.

—Matthew 5:13-16

The Roman Emperor Julian (332–363) was not a fan of Christianity. He hoped to restore the glory of the ancient Roman religion, one in which a multitude of deities was worshipped in the temples and shrines scattered across Rome.

But Julian encountered a problem when trying to convince Roman citizens to turn their backs on the recently authorized Christian faith: the power of love in practice.

Here's how Julian said it: “[Christianity] has been specifically advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers...[The Christians] care not only for their own poor but for ours as well; while those who belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render them.”¹

1 Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (London, Penguin Books, 1964), 37-38.

In other words, how could a pagan religion hope to gain followers when Christianity set itself apart through compassion and generosity?

But that was then, and this is now.

Unfortunately, Christianity doesn't enjoy such a lofty reputation any longer.

A couple of years ago I was scuba diving in Bermuda. After I was put in a group with other divers, the conversation turned toward the inevitable question: What do you do for a living? When I responded that I was a pastor and professor, my new acquaintances' looks of surprise, confusion, and concern told me there would be no follow-up questions.

Perhaps you've had a similar response on an airplane or at a family reunion when the topic of faith came up.

In the book *unChristian*, David Kinnaman reports that the majority of young Americans view Christianity as judgmental, hypocritical, overly political, anti-homosexual, out of touch, and insensitive.

Kinnaman sums up his finding with this statement: "We [Christians] have become famous for what we oppose rather than who we are for."²

How did that happen? How did a church so generous and giving that even an emperor couldn't swing public opinion back to his preferred religion get to the point where we are today? How did the church's reputation get so bad that it shuts down conversations on a scuba-diving boat before those conversations even get started?

I believe Kinnaman put his finger on one reason: People expect us to use our faith as a way to point out all their faults and shortcomings. I imagine what went through the heads of the couple I was about to join under the sea³ was something like this: "Better not let this guy know what I'm up to in my personal life; I'll never hear the end of it."

We (and by "we," I mean Christians) have tragically found a way to do exactly what Jesus asks his listeners *not* to do: Hide their light under a basket. Bottle up the saltiness of their influence.

In this case, I'd suggest we all too often hide the gospel of love, light, and hope under the basket of criticism and self-righteousness.⁴

You can't be salt and light without being actively engaged with the world around you, and the church is, by and large, not engaged in the broader culture. Perhaps that's because many Christians—at least Christians in America—believe they're at war with their culture.

Few Christians would say they've declared war in so many words, but consider the terms of engagement with culture. See if any have unintentionally wiggled their way into how you're living out your faith:

2 David Kinnaman, *unChristian* (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 2007), 26.

3 Please tell me Sabastian from *The Little Mermaid* started singing in your head when you read that phrase. I need to not be the only one.

4 I promise this book isn't just me railing about Christians getting it wrong. I love my brothers and sisters in the body of Christ. This isn't about ME criticizing YOU or even THEM. It's about Jesus challenging US.

- We must be diligent about not being influenced by “outsiders” (that is, anyone not part of the Christian community). Especially suspect are sources of entertainment like Hollywood and Disney.
- We must publicly criticize (and perhaps protest or boycott) companies and celebrities when we don’t approve of their behavior.
- We must fight in the arenas of politics, media, education, and law to ensure that our moral code is forced on everyone. Dialogue isn’t a priority—winning is.
- We have an obligation to confront others when we believe they’re living contrary to biblical ideals. It’s our duty to continually occupy moral high ground and assert why our beliefs and values are superior to the beliefs and values of anyone who disagrees with us.

Meaning we become light hidden under a bushel. Salt locked inside salt shakers.

Compare those rules of cultural engagement with the ministry of Jesus, with how he went about engaging with the world.

Were Jesus to show up today, I suspect “Culture Warrior Christians” would almost certainly hate him. He’d spend time with ex-cons, hookers, junkies, and pretty much anybody who needed a message of hope rather than a message of condemnation.

And he’d refuse to let his message and ministry be co-opted by any political position. I say that because back when Jesus was delivering his sermon, it would have been easy and popular for him to denounce the occupying Roman government and army. Yet he didn’t do it.

Instead, he commended the faith of a Roman Centurion. He told people to pay their taxes. When people wanted to declare him king and go to battle for him, he simply walked away.⁵

Jesus’ purpose is bigger than fighting culture; he’s interested in *redeeming* it. And that certainly strikes some of his followers as an unreasonable—perhaps even unwise—goal.

Jesus tells his listeners something that’s as remarkable as it is unreasonable: They’ll play a part in how he’ll redeem their world.

“Redeeming” is something of a foreign concept to many of us. We live in a consumer-driven culture where if something’s broken, we toss it and get a replacement.

But God isn’t a consumer. He’s a creator.

5 “Read my lips: Pay your taxes” wouldn’t be an applause line then any more than it would be today. Fortunately, Jesus wasn’t trying to win an election to become Messiah.

You've undoubtedly heard John 3:16 more than once: "For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."

That's why Jesus is sitting on a hillside delivering this sermon to a crowd. He's loving them, telling them truth. The entire reason God came to earth in the person of Jesus is for love.

God lovingly created this world and never stopped loving it—along with each person in it.

When something's broken, God looks for an opportunity to make it as good as new. That's what he's doing in our relationship with him through the sacrifice of Jesus. That's what he's doing when he gives us his Holy Spirit to heal the broken, hurting, corrupt areas of our lives.

And that's what he's doing when Jesus calls us to join him in healing the rest of the world, too. Which *will* happen, by the way. In the book of Revelation, God promises to make all things new again.⁶

In the meantime, Jesus hasn't deputized us to attack the people and culture around us. He *has* called us to influence both to turn toward the Creator and be part of a renewed future.

Do you see what's unreasonable here?

It's unreasonable to come up against a force that's pushing against what you believe and, rather than fight it, settle for influencing it through kindness and compassion. To engage in civil conversation instead of civil war.

To be salt and light.

But don't be mistaken: Both salt and light are powerful. Far more powerful, as our friend Julian discovered, than bullying and bombast.

Just as salt enhances the flavor of food, our influence can bring out some of the original flavor of this world: a world where death and decay were never supposed to have an impact.⁷

And just as even a dim light shining from a cabin calls to a person lost and wandering in the dark, we can draw people toward a place of peace and contentment.

Christian culture warriors believe our light is like a hazard light, designed to warn of danger and destruction. Yet Jesus doesn't use that image.

Jesus describes a light that attracts those who need a place of sanctuary. A light that provides a way to see that place of refuge clearly.

But, practically speaking, how do we live in such a way that we shine out a light that can shift culture? How can we be salt that gives those who taste us a hunger for Jesus? What's a reasonable response to Jesus' unreasonable expectation?

Let me suggest three culture-shifters you can live out today...

6 Revelation 21:5

7 Romans 8:21

Do good deeds.

If you want to help point any particular person (or group of people) toward a friendship with Jesus, I'd encourage you to find ways to serve them.

Lighting the way to Jesus requires that you have influence with people. That only comes in the context of a relationship, and building a relationship starts when you show people you value them. That may involve providing for a physical need, or it can be as easy as starting a conversation.

I was once out for a run in my local park when I saw a pavilion with a banner hung across the front that announced that the people meeting there were part of a local "Pagan Society."

I stopped running, walked over, and told them I noticed their banner and asked them about their group—who they were and what they were all about. Nobody wanted to talk to me.⁸

I'm assuming most of the pagan society's spur-of-the-moment interactions aren't positive. Eventually, I was pointed to the leader of the society. I sat down and had a conversation that started with me asking about their beliefs and then listening to what the leader had to say.

When she asked me what I believed, I was happy to share.

She told me they worship nature. I told her that I also love nature, and as a follower of Jesus, I believe nature is a gift to humanity from a God who loves us.

When I walked away from that brief encounter, the people in that group—all of whom had been listening in—knew that a Christian had just been respectful and friendly to their leader. My interaction was an opportunity to build a bridge instead of a wall.

If you aren't part of a faith community that provides opportunities to launch relationships and do good deeds in your community, I suggest you look into the Salvation Army or another organization that allows you to genuinely care for people through action.

Seriously. You may not be saved by doing good works, but you certainly shake salt liberally as you do them.

Shine—and explain why you're shining.

Feel free to share what you're doing on social media or other outlets, but also share the reason for those good deeds. Keep in mind the purpose for serving others is to direct praise to God, not yourself. To open up conversations, not collect accolades.

That can make selfies of you swinging a hammer or dropping off groceries tricky.

8 Literally the first time something like that ever happened to me. Aside from all four years of high school. And middle school before that. I'm going to stop talking now.

Remaining humble in the midst of putting others first is hard, so if sharing about it takes you to a place where you have a hard time doing it for the right reasons, share selectively. Or decide to keep it off social media altogether.

My point: According to Jesus, good deeds are meant to shine like a city on a hill, not a spotlight on ourselves.

I recently found myself in an unexpected job transition. When I shared about this sudden development on Facebook, numerous friends sent me messages of support and encouragement.

One of the most meaningful messages was from a co-worker I met during my days as a corporate employee, prior to my moving into full-time ministry.

His message explained that he was an atheist, something I was unaware of because we didn't have much opportunity to talk at our former place of employment. He said he liked my posts—while not subscribing to the theology in them—and that he admired people of faith.

I was so grateful to receive this message.

Our good deeds and life of faith can be inviting, like a campfire in the woods, or uninviting, like a flashlight in the eyes. My former colleague was telling me I'd lit a welcoming path toward Jesus, and that's something I'm always hoping to do.

Contribute to culture; don't just criticize it.

If you think a piece of art, a charity, or a politician is pointing away from God's Kingdom, then create something pointing toward it.

Anyone can criticize. If you want to make a difference in my life, do what Jesus did: *Show me something better.*

Jesus didn't focus on attacking the unhealthy religious and political practices of his day. He spent his time pointing toward something better.

Mother Teresa didn't exhaust herself railing against the caste system in Calcutta. Instead, she poured out her life offering care to people who were literally dying in the streets.

The reality is that culture and society aren't the enemy. They're necessary in life, and we won't shift culture by censoring music, television, film, painting, sculpture, government, education, or any other expression of culture and society. And I think we've proven we can't get away with replacing what exists with sub-par examples that just happen to be Christian.

But we *can* provide something better: artistically compelling alternatives with redemptive value.

I'd love for every follower of Jesus to explore being an artist. Writing, pottery, playing an instrument, photography, dancing, theater, poetry, storytelling, cake decorating, whatever—it all counts.

Why? Because we're all made in the image of a creative God. And the arts are how we can share our stories—and shine our lights—in a way culture willingly embraces.

God is artistically generous with our world—think beautiful sunsets and majestic mountains. He tells his story through creative means, and as his children, we’re invited to follow his example.

When I realized Jesus was calling me to contribute rather than just critique, I reached out to others in my church community who engage in the art of writing. We meet regularly to encourage and challenge each other, pushing toward excellence so what we create will contribute beauty to our world.

You may be a woodworker, knitter, storyteller, baker, or maker of internet cat memes. Whatever your skill, gift, or passion, there’s not only room but a *need* for you to utilize it. You need to do it for your own sake and for the sake of shining brightly and sprinkling salt in your community.

Jesus doesn’t allow us the luxury of a bunker mentality, hiding out in a tight world of fellow believers.

He’s calling us to be in this world *and* not of it,⁹ which is the perfect spot for shining and saltiness...if we’re willing to join him in engaging his world.

You up for it?

9 Taken from John 17:15-16. Often this verse is summarized as “in this world *but* not of it.” I believe the word *and* is a better representation of the text.

■ ■ A Brief Pause

Shining. Being salty. They're both ways to have an impact on the wider world.

Take a few moments to consider these questions. Jot down your thoughts. Listen for what Jesus may be telling you about himself—and you.

What does this section of Jesus' sermon tell you about Jesus?

What does your response to Jesus' expectation that you be shining and salty reveal about you?

How do you feel about the idea that you're creative? In what ways do you see yourself that way? And in what ways might your creativity point toward Jesus?

JESUS: HE'S A WONDERFUL GUY. IF ONLY HE WEREN'T SO COMPLETELY... UNREASONABLE.

Jesus is *incredibly* unreasonable, especially in what may be his greatest sermon ever: the Sermon on the Mount.

But it's through Jesus' unreasonable demands that he changes us. We love radically, forgive liberally, and trust recklessly. As his challenges pry us out of our comfort zones, we see Jesus more clearly and discover who we can become.

Join author Thomas Christianson as he strolls alongside Jesus through the Sermon on the Mount. Along the way you'll hear laugh-out-loud stories, encounter soul-searching teaching, and get practical, doable suggestions for walking that narrow path toward a more purposeful, joy-filled life.

And you'll discover that, with Jesus, everything is possible—even the unreasonable.



Thomas Christianson is a pastor, writer, speaker, and professor. His work has been featured on numerous websites, radio programs, podcasts, and television shows. He is a graduate of Christ for the Nations Institute in Dallas and holds a master's degree in practical theology from Regent University in Virginia Beach. He is currently pursuing a doctorate from Fuller Theological Seminary. He lives in Baltimore with his wife and three children.

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