

# Lunatic or Liar

Rev. David W. Edwards, MA

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Text: Matt 12:46-50; 13:53-58

In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis wrote a chapter he titled “The Shocking Alternative.” In it he posits what some have called Lewis’s Trilemma, which has been shortened to this: Jesus was either a lunatic, a liar, or, if he was who he claimed to be, Lord. Lunatic, liar, or Lord. I want to quote extensively, here, because Lewis develops his argument, and we are in danger of missing what he is really saying if we take this too briefly:

*Among these Jews there suddenly turns up a man who goes about talking as if He was God. He claims to forgive sins. He says He has always existed. He says He is coming to judge the world at the end of time. Now let us get this clear. Among Pantheists, like the Indians, anyone might say he was a part of God, or one with God: there would be nothing very odd about it. But this man, since He was a Jew, could not mean that kind of God. God, in their language, meant the Being outside the world, who had made it and was infinitely different from anything else. And when you have grasped that, you will see that what this man said was, quite simply, the most shocking thing that has ever been uttered by human lips.*

*One part of the claim tends to slip past us unnoticed because we have heard it so often that we no longer see what it amounts to. I mean the claim to forgive sins: any sins. Now unless the speaker is God, this is really so preposterous as to be comic. We can all understand how a man forgives offenses against himself. You tread on my toes and I forgive you, you steal my money and I forgive you. But what should we make of a man, himself unrobbed and untrodden on, who announced that he forgave you for treating on other men’s toes and stealing other men’s money? Asinine fatuity is the kindest description we could give of his conduct. Yet this is what Jesus did. He told people that their sins were forgiven, and never waited to consult all the other people whom their sins had undoubtedly injured. He unhesitatingly behaved as if He was the party chiefly concerned, the person chiefly offended in all offenses. This makes sense only if He really was the God whose laws are broken and whose love is wounded in every sin. In the mouth of any speaker who is not God, these words imply what I can only regard as a silliness and conceit unrivalled by any other character in history.*

*Yet (and this is the strange, significant thing) even His enemies, when they read the Gospels, do not usually get the impression of silliness or conceit. Still less to unprejudiced readers. Christ says that he is ‘humble and meek’ and we believe Him; not noticing that, if He were merely a man, humility and meekness are the very last characteristic we could attribute to some of His sayings.*

*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.*

And here we get to the meat of Lewis' argument: *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 Him being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.*<sup>1</sup>

We have already read in Matthew that the Pharisees have twice accused Jesus of being demon-possessed and casting out demons by the power of Satan. In Mark's rendition of one of those situations, we read, *When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind"* (Mk 3:21). But then the clarity of his logic regarding a house divided against itself proved that Jesus was lucid and that he was not demonic.

I've combined two incidents that are interludes in Jesus' teaching. We skipped over the first in chapter 12, just before Jesus began to speak in parables. The Pharisees had challenged Jesus to show them a sign, some proof of his identity. They wanted a clear declaration that Jesus was claiming to be either a prophet or the Messiah, and either would have been a basis for their condemnation. But he wouldn't give it to them. It is at this point that Jesus' mother and brothers show up and request his presence. If Mark's account is accurate, they have decided that Jesus is out of his mind and needs to be taken into care. In Matthew's account we aren't told their reason.

But Jesus turns the tables on them. Here's the problem: The fifth command is *Honor your father and mother* (Ex 20:12). That legal obligation meant that Jesus should have dropped what he was doing and attended to his mother. We will come back to this at some point, but the truth is that sometimes mundane matters, that is, the things of earth and human relationships, get in the way and are a distraction from ministry. Jesus' mission meant that, as he told his parent in Luke 2:49, that he had to be about his Father's business. Jesus had a job to do. And that meant that he had to leave behind his normal family obligations.

Jesus was setting the example for his disciples. The kingdom and the work of the kingdom are too important to be derailed. Jesus told his would-be followers, *"If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple"* (Lk 14:26). He did not mean literally hate, but to set them aside for the purpose of following Jesus. *"No one can serve two masters"* (Mt. 6:24). At some point you will have to choose. Jesus models for us that our first loyalty is to God. That is why some denominations, the Catholic church in particular, wants a celibate priesthood – so that wife and children do not distract from the ministry. And that is why, if one is feeling a call to ministry, their spouse must be completely supportive and ready to go wherever. It is a sad fact that many who are called to ministry are never able to fulfill their call because of opposition within their own family. Who are Jesus' mother and brothers? Only those whose first priority is Jesus and his kingdom.

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<sup>1</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001. © 1952, 1980 C.S. Lewis Pte., Ltd.), pp 51-52.

We cannot be diverted by politics, by secular work, by family. Jesus told them to seek first the kingdom (Mt 6:33), to serve only one master, to make the kingdom of God our first priority and our first love. A friend of mine, my age, is still pastoring with no thought of retirement. He told me recently, "I will retire when they pry this black Book from my cold, dead fingers." His love for Jesus and for the work of the kingdom of God holds him steady. Marsha asked me about him the other day. I have thought about retiring and have given the church board a letter - which they have essentially rejected - but I love preaching the word of God. I love opening the Word to you. And it has cost me a lot over the years. But, back to our text.

There's another problem with family: they knew you growing up. They saw your tantrums. They know what kind of a child you were, what kind of a teen you were, what your attitudes were. They know all about you, probably more than you are comfortable with. That was Jesus' problem, too. So when he went back to his hometown and began to teach in their synagogue, those good folks had a problem. "Who is he to be telling us this sort of thing?" "Who does he think he is." He's just the carpenter's son. We never thought he'd amount to anything more than that. They knew his dad and his mom. They knew his brothers and sisters.

And here's a point where we've let minutiae get in the way of truth. People have gotten into a twist over whether Jesus' "brothers" were actually cousins - there is nothing that actually supports that interpretation, whether Mary (the Virgin Mary) ever had any other children. They want to protect Mary from the reality of human relations and preserve her eternal virginity, and so they invent all sorts of word games and convoluted reasoning to dismiss any suggestion of other children. Perhaps these were Joseph's kids from his previous marriage. But we're not told that Joseph was ever married before, and that would make them the elders, and causing confusion in other places. It's possible, I suppose, but it's all mere speculation based on air. But all of that is a diversion from what Matthew is trying to tell us. Nazareth knew Jesus. His family were their relations and their neighbors. They all knew what sort of people these BenJosephs were. And here's Jesus acting all uppity, as if he's better than them. Matthew says, *They took offense at him.*

In Luke's rendition of this event, Jesus read the portion from Isaiah, claiming, "*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me ...*" (Is 61:1-2; Lk 4:18). Luke reports, *All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill ... in order to throw him off the cliff* (Lk 4:28-29). They weren't just offended; they tried to kill him. Who does he think he is, anyway? How dare he preach to us!

That's the question. Who does he think he is? He claims to be one with the Father. He claims to exist before Abraham. He uses the name of God to describe himself. He interprets the Law as if he were the Author. He forgives sin. Who does he think he is? Listen, if I claimed to be God, you would be right in locking me away where I couldn't hurt myself. But here's the rub:

No one who heard him speak, even if they couldn't understand what he was saying, thought he was crazy. The one time, mentioned in Mark 3, was when Jesus wasn't resting and wasn't eating. He was surrounded by crowds *so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat*, Mark reports, so his family tried to intervene on his behalf. It wasn't because of what he was saying. It wasn't because of his miracles.

And they didn't think he was a liar. In fact, every time the Pharisees, Sadducees, teachers of the law, or anyone else tried to trap him in his words, he outwitted them time and again. He knew the law better than they did. They didn't argue with the truth of his words. They couldn't argue because they knew he was speaking truth. Those who walked with him, those who argued with him, those who opposed him, all who knew him knew him as sane and truthful. Was Jesus a liar? No one ever accused him of that. Was Jesus a lunatic? Again, no one ever accused him of that. So the Nazareth question stands: Just who does Jesus think he is?

The corollary question we have to answer is this: who do you think Jesus is? If you think he was a liar, it will be up to you to point out whatever he may have said that was untrue. If you think he was a lunatic, it will be up to you to show that he was. Jesus himself asked the question, and we will likely come to that again at some point. Just who do you think Jesus is?

The usual answer in modern society is that Jesus was a great moral teacher. And they will spend hours and unlimited breath recounting all the things Jesus taught. I have a reprint of Thomas Jefferson's Bible. Jefferson denied the deity of Jesus Christ, and his Bible is a cut-and-paste collage of Jesus' physical life and teaching - minus anything that smacks of the miraculous. To do that, he had to leave out most of the gospel of John and significant portions of the other gospels. The title he gave is *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth extracted textually from the Gospels*. Notice the word "extracted." He extracted the teachings he liked and avoided the miraculous he did not like. Many people today try to do the same thing.

The problem is that Jesus' teaching cannot be separated from his claims about himself. If he were a liar, his "great moral teaching" is in doubt. How can we know any of it to be true? If he were a lunatic, even his "great moral teaching" is the mere ravings of a lunatic? What then can we proclaim as sane? You see, Jesus taught as one having authority. He taught as one who had the right to teach. He forgave sins as one who had the right to forgive sins. He claimed to be one with the Father, and told his disciples that when they saw him they saw the Father. He claimed intimacy with God. It is intellectually dishonest to try to separate Jesus claims about himself from his teaching and his behavior.

As Lewis claimed, the one thing you cannot do is dismiss Jesus as a great moral teacher. He did not leave that option open to us. He was either a liar, a lunatic, or he was who he said he was, the very Son of God. Who do you say he is? You must decide.