

Unwrapping God's Greatest Gift
THE HUMANITY OF JESUS CHRIST
Hebrews 2:14-18

During the 19th Century missionaries were traveling to the farthest corners of the world to bring the good news about Jesus to all people. In some places however the Western culture that came with the gospel proved to be a hindrance to people in parts of the world that were not at like Europe. People in these cultures didn't feel like they had anything in common with these European missionaries, so the idea that their European faith could be of benefit seemed far fetched. It was during this time that a young missionary to China named Hudson Taylor decided to try something new.

His goal was the same as every other missionary, for those without Christ to become like him by accepting Christ. But Hudson Taylor decided that first he should become like the people he was trying to reach. He adopted traditional Chinese dress, shaved the front of his head and grew a long ponytail in the back which was the traditional hairstyle for Chinese men at that time. He did whatever he could to blend into the culture of the people he was trying to reach. He found that in becoming like the Chinese people more doors were open to him, more people were willing to listen to what he had to say and more people were coming to know Jesus Christ. Taylor eventually recruited other missionaries who adopted his approach and founded the China Inland Mission which has reached hundreds of thousands of people Jesus; and it all started with the decision to become like these people before asking them to become like him.

Of course Hudson Taylor wasn't really Chinese. He could act Chinese. He could dress the right way, wear his hair the right way, speak the right language (although never as well as a native speaker) but he could never really become Chinese. He looked different and he had different experiences. I bet if he could have actually become Chinese, he would have. I bet if there was a way for him to magically look like and speak like and have all the experiences and knowledge of someone who had been born and raised in China he would have but that would have been impossible.

Fortunately for us what was impossible for Hudson Taylor is not impossible for God. Turn with me if you would to our passage for today. You'll find it in the book of Hebrews chapter 2, we'll be looking at verses 14 through 18.

This weekend is the beginning of advent, the time of year where we get ready to celebrate Christmas. Christmas is all about God doing for us what Hudson Taylor did for the Chinese people. It's about God the Son becoming like us. God is so different from us that we can have a hard time relating to him sometimes and Christmas is about God bridging that gap by coming to earth and becoming like us.

Here's what our text says, I'll be reading from the New Living Translation.

“Because God's children are human beings-- made of flesh and blood-- Jesus also became flesh and blood by being born in human form. For only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of the Devil, who had the power of death. ¹⁵ Only in this way could he deliver those who have lived all their lives as slaves to the fear of dying. ¹⁶ We all know that Jesus came to help the

descendants of Abraham, not to help the angels.¹⁷ Therefore, it was necessary for Jesus to be in every respect like us, his brothers and sisters, so that he could be our merciful and faithful High Priest before God. He then could offer a sacrifice that would take away the sins of the people.¹⁸ Since he himself has gone through suffering and temptation, he is able to help us when we are being tempted.” (Hebrews 2:14-18 NLT)

Our text makes it pretty clear that God the son didn't just become like us externally but that Jesus has become like us in every way. You see all Hudson Taylor could do was study the language and culture and change his clothes and hair so that he could look and act like the people he was trying to reach but Jesus actually became one of us.

Now I want to make this clear from the start: in becoming human Jesus Christ never stopped being God. He is God the son just as he has always been God the son and because he is God he is more than human. So as I talk about his humanity I don't want you to think that I'm trying to make Jesus anything less than God. Next week Pastor David is going to talk about Christ's divinity and everything that means but today we're going to focus on Christ's humanity. And I think that's appropriate because Christ becoming human is what Christmas is all about.

Our passage for today highlights a few ways in which Jesus was in fact completely human. The first thing it says, in verse 14, is that Jesus was made flesh and blood. This means that Jesus was a normal physical human being and as we read the gospels we see that this is true. In several places they tell us that Jesus got hungry. He needed food to live and when he hadn't eaten he felt it. That's why Satan waited until Jesus had gone forty days without food before he tempted him to turn stones into bread. He knew Jesus was so hungry that it would be a very compelling temptation. We also know that Jesus got tired. Remember when he was traveling through Samaria, John tells us he was tired from the journey. That's why he didn't go into town with his disciples to buy food and why he didn't feel like drawing his own water. Matthew tells about the time that Jesus was so tired he slept through a violent storm at the bottom of a tiny boat. His disciples finally had to wake him up. Of course we know that Jesus could be injured and killed like any other physical human being because of what happened to him at the crucifixion. He bled and died just like anyone else made of flesh and blood would have.

But there is more to being human after all than our bodies isn't there? So if Jesus were simply put into a physical human body that wouldn't necessarily make him truly human. But the writer of Hebrews doesn't leave it at that does he? In fact he tells us in verse 17 that Jesus became like us in every respect. That means everything that is true about us that makes us human is true about Jesus.

You might be thinking: “wait a minute, now I know there's at least one thing that is true about us as humans that isn't true about Jesus. We're sinners, the Bible says we've all sinned but Jesus never sinned.” That's true Jesus never sinned and he never will sin and every other human being that has occupied this planet has sinned but that isn't what makes us human. We were created as humans to live without sin. Sin doesn't make us human it makes less human. That's why when we speak about truly awful and repelling sins we speak them as being “inhuman” or “subhuman”. So in a sense Jesus is more human than any of us. He has everything that makes someone human without any of the dehumanizing sin that we deal with.

So what is it that makes us human? That's a question that philosophers have debated for ages and continue to debate. I'm not going to try and lay out an extensive definition but I would like to highlight two areas that I think we sometimes overlook with regard to Christ's humanity. The first is that Christ had normal human emotions.

A number of the movies that have been made about the life of Jesus portray him as being utterly serene to the point where nothing bothers or excites him. He just smiles peacefully and always speaks slowly calmly never showing any emotion. I don't like this portrayal of Jesus. It makes him seem less human. No one I know of acts that way, unless they are heavily sedated. Not only that but it doesn't fit with the picture we get of Jesus from the Bible. While Jesus never allowed his emotions to lead him into sin he experienced the full range of human emotions and the gospels show him expressing those emotions.

We see a picture of Christ's righteous anger when he clears the temple, turning over the money changing tables and chasing the merchants out with a whip. We see a picture of Jesus feeling deep sorrow at the death of his friend Lazarus when he weeps openly at his grave site in front of many other people. There are many places in the gospels that tell us that Jesus was filled with compassion for people. That is a deeply emotional word and that emotion of compassion often prompted Jesus to action. We know that Jesus felt emotional pain as well. In the garden of Gethsemane we are told he was in anguish. He was in emotional torment in anticipation of the suffering he was about to endure on the cross. Jesus also felt joy and happiness. Luke tells us that when the 70 men he had sent out to minister returned with reports of their success that Jesus was filled with joy. So clearly Jesus felt and expressed normal human emotions and this only makes sense since emotions are a huge part of what it means to be truly human.

Another aspect of Christ's humanity that we sometimes overlook is the fact that he had normal human limitations. Although Jesus is God and as God is all knowing and all powerful when he became human he willingly chose to set aside his infinite power and knowledge during his time on earth. I know what you're thinking. "What about all those miracles? Jesus did things that no human being could do. He walked on water, healed the sick, turned water into wine and countless other things. He couldn't have had normal human limitations?"

It's true that Jesus did things that a human being could never do on his own but Jesus didn't do those things on his own. In John 5:19 he says that he could do "nothing by himself" but only "what he sees the Father doing". Jesus performed miracles the same way that other people in the Bible performed miracles through dependence on the Holy Spirit of God. We see this clearly in the gospels. In Luke 4 when Jesus begins his ministry we're told that he was "filled with the Spirit". In Luke 2:52 we're told that as Jesus grew up he "grew in wisdom". That means he got smarter, he had to learn. He didn't know everything right away. And in Mark 6:5-6 Jesus is in his hometown of Nazareth and we're told that he "COULD not do many miracles there" because of their lack of faith. It doesn't say Jesus' wouldn't do more miracles but that he couldn't. Why couldn't he do them? Because the Holy Spirit was the power behind those miracles and the Holy Spirit had determined that he would work only where there was faith. So Jesus was limited because of the lack of faith.

So Jesus became like us in every way; physically, emotionally and he even took on human limitations but he didn't stop there he also lived a human life and experienced what we experience as human beings living in a fallen world. Verse 18 tells us that Jesus "has gone through suffering and temptation" just like you and me.

We already talked about how Jesus suffered physically and emotionally on the cross but he also suffered in the more ordinary ways that you and I suffer. He suffered financially. He was homeless, having “no place to lay his head” and he went at least three years with no reliable source of income. He lived solely on the charity of others. He suffered socially. He was considered an outcast and was constantly criticized by the authorities of his day. Everyone who claimed to be his friend eventually abandoned him leaving him to face death alone. He also suffered the stress of being constantly put upon by others. They didn’t have the paparazzi back then but Jesus had less privacy in his life than the most tenaciously stalked celebrity of our day. The crowds followed him everywhere. Even when he tried to get away from them with his disciples they would find out where he was going and get there ahead of him. He was surrounded by sick and demonized people all the time and they weren’t necessarily grateful or devoted. Many people in the crowds were unemployed vagrants who had nothing better to do than follow Jesus around just to watch the commotion.

In addition to suffering Jesus was tempted. He faced the kind of temptation most of us will never encounter because he was directly tempted by the Devil himself. And Jesus wasn’t only tempted in the desert he was tempted constantly. Remember how he suffered in the Garden of Gethsemane, so much that he was sweating drops of blood. He was tempted then, he asked God to take the cup away from him, to let him off the hook, let him out of going to the cross. And he could have gotten out of it too. He could have called Angels down to defend him and rescue him but he didn’t. He didn’t give in to temptation there either. He obeyed even when it was hard. I think he faced temptation all the time, to bail out of his ministry to cut short his suffering but he never gave in. And he resisted temptation the same way he performed his miracles by relying on the Holy Spirit to strengthen him.

The truly amazing thing about all of this is that you and I as believers have access to the same power that Jesus relied on for everything he did. That doesn’t mean that we’re going to perform miracles like him. Most people in the history of the world have not been called by God to be his instrument for performing miracles. Jesus’ ministry was unique. He was called by God to do many miraculous signs to show who he was. You and I don’t have that calling but we do have access to that power and if the Holy Spirit can perform miracles through Jesus he can help us face and overcome our daily struggles.

So, Jesus became fully human not only physically but emotionally and with human limitations and human experiences. But why would Jesus do it anyway? He did it so that we could become like him. Not that we could become God but that we could become as people the kind of person Jesus was. Jesus had freedom from the power of the devil and showed that by overcoming death, he experienced a perfect relationship with God unhindered by sin and when he did face temptation he found help to overcome is by relying on the Holy Spirit. These are all ways in which he wants us to become like him.

Verse 14 tells us that Jesus had to become like us so that he could die, and that because he died we can become like him, free from the power of the Devil and his ultimate weapon, death. Satan has real power in this world and the reality of death proves that. We are all naturally afraid of death because death is unnatural and so we are, as verse 15 puts it, salves to that fear. The fact that we all die and the fear that accompanies death demonstrate Satan’s power over us. But Satan has never had real power over Christ himself.

Jesus did not have to die but by putting himself under the power of death Jesus overcame that power. Jesus willingly faced death because he knew that Satan didn't have the right to take his life and that God would raise him from the dead. In doing this Jesus overcame death and broke the power of Satan, exactly what the second half of verse 14 shows us. Satan's ultimate power is death and Christ defeated that power so we don't have to fear death anymore. When we trust in Jesus we too can be free from the fear death and not be subject to the power of Satan because death will no longer be a threat to us. We will have the promise of eternal life instead. So Satan will have no more power over us than he did over Jesus. It might look like he has power over us temporarily, just like it looked for a moment that he had defeated Christ with death but we will be raised to new life the way Jesus was and will overcome Satan's ultimate weapon if we become like Christ.

In his classic book, *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, C.S. Lewis gives us a picture of how this all works. If you haven't read the book perhaps you saw the movie that came out a couple of years ago. The story centers around two brothers and two sisters who stumble into the magical world of Narnia through a wardrobe. There these children find a beautiful land under the grip of the evil white witch who has made it always winter but never Christmas. The children soon learn that the great lion Aslan, son of the Emperor over the Sea, has come into Narnia so they decide to join up with him to try to overcome the witch's power. But Edmund, one of the children, betrays his siblings by going over to the witch's side in order to help her capture them. She fails to capture the others but keeps Edmund as a hostage insisting that according to the deep magic that the Emperor used to create Narnia, she has the right to execute Edmund as a traitor. Aslan, acknowledges that she has this right but strikes a bargain with her. He offers to take Edmund's place and allow her to kill him instead. Since the witch knows that Aslan is the only one powerful enough to defeat her she eagerly accepts the deal. Then, when she has Aslan bound to the great stone table and is about to kill him she boasts that as soon he is dead she will find Edmund and the other children and kill them anyway.

But the witch's plan backfires. The stone table (representing death) breaks in two and Aslan come back to life. The children are astonished to see him so he explains what happened. He gives his explanation on page 163 of the book.

"...though the Witch knew the Deep Magic there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who has committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backward."

That is what happened at the cross. Jesus put himself in our place taking the punishment of death that was rightfully ours and by doing that he broke the power of death and of the devil all together.

What Jesus did for us on the cross was offer a sacrifice. In that way he was taking on the role of a priest. Verse 17 tells us another reason Jesus became like us "to take away our sins". His perfect sacrifice allows us to be free from sin but before he could offer that sacrifice he had to become like us. Why? Because, he could not function as our priest unless he was one of us. The job of a priest is to represent the people before God. He stands before God as their

representative and offers a sacrifice on their behalf but you can't represent a group of people unless you are one of them.

This is true in our world today as well. If I wanted to compete in the Olympics I would have to represent the United States. I couldn't represent France or China or Mexico because I am not one of them. I couldn't represent them unless I became one of them by moving to their country and becoming a citizen. The same is true of our congressmen who represent us in the federal government. I couldn't run for congress as a representative from Texas or Idaho because I don't live there I'm not one of them. So it is with Jesus, to represent us before God he had to become one of us. He had to become like us in every way so that he could offer a sacrifice that would take away our sins.

Sin is the real problem here. Satan's power is based on sin. Sin separates us from God and puts us under Satan's power. The reason he has power over us is because we are sinful, we've all done wrong things. That's where the power of death comes from. Death is the natural result of sin. The reason Satan never had power over Jesus and the reason Jesus didn't have to die is because Jesus was completely without sin. He never did anything to separate himself from God. So to defeat Satan and to overcome death Jesus had to take away our sins so that we could have the kind of relationship with God that he does. To do that he had to satisfy the penalty for sin which is death. In essence Jesus who was without sin had to make it so that we could be without sin.

In the Old Testament the high priest would offer sacrifices for himself and for all of the people. That sacrifice meant that the animal was dying for the sins of the people but these animal sacrifices were never enough. They weren't adequate to pay for human sin. Not only that but since the Priest himself was a sinner and deserved to die he wasn't qualified to offer the perfect sacrifice. Christ, however, offered himself as the perfect sinless human sacrifice the only kind that could ever truly pay the penalty of human sin. In addition to serving as the perfect sacrifice, Christ himself served as the perfect high priest. He was completely without sin and yet completely human, capable of representing us before God and presenting himself as the perfect sacrifice to take away our sin.

But in becoming like us Jesus did even more than take away our sins. Verse 18 tells us that he is able to help us when we are tempted to sin. Jesus faced the same temptations and trials that you and I face. So there is nothing that we go through that he doesn't understand and hasn't experienced in some sense. He understands us.

Not only that but he overcame all the temptations that he faced by relying on the Holy Spirit and when we trust in him we receive that same power to overcome temptation. Jesus helps us not only by understanding us and setting an example for us but by giving us access to the very power he relied on to overcome temptation. So when we face temptation we can be like Jesus by relying on the Holy Spirit to help us overcome it.

Jesus became like us for a reason, so that we could become like him. In his humanity he has given us the chance to overcome the broken power of Satan and be free from the fear of death the way he was. He's provided us with a way to have our sins taken away so that we like him can have an unhindered relationship with God. And he has provided us with an example and with power to help us overcome temptation. But none of this happens automatically. In becoming like us he has made it possible for us to become like him but we have a part to play.

Verse 16 tells us that Jesus came to help the descendants of Abraham. Now the book of Hebrews was written primarily to Jewish Christians. The people reading this letter were the literal physical descendants of Abraham, so when the writer here says Jesus came to help “the descendants of Abraham” it’s like he’s saying “Jesus came to help you guys” but I think there is more to it than that. We know from elsewhere in the Bible that Jesus came not only to help Jewish people but to help non-Jews as well. But the promise that Jesus would come way back in the Old Testament was given to Abraham and his descendants. So how come people who aren’t his physical descendants get in on all this great stuff Jesus did for us.

Romans 4:16 gives us the answer. It says “God's promise is given to us as a free gift. And we are certain to receive it, whether or not we follow Jewish customs, if we have faith like Abraham's. For Abraham is the father of all who believe.” If we have faith in God the way Abraham had faith in God we are considered to be his “spiritual descendants”. That’s what the Bible tells us in a number of places. So Jesus came to help not only Abraham’s physical descendants but all of his spiritual descendants.

How do we become the spiritual descendants of Abraham? It says we have to have faith. To have faith simply means to trust. It means we need to rely on God and not on ourselves the way Abraham relied on God. We have to trust Jesus, God the son who became like us so that we could become like him. We need to trust Jesus as our source of righteousness. We have to trust that he is the only one who could take away our sins and to rely on him to do that. It also means that like Abraham we trust God enough to do what he says. We have to let him be in charge of our lives. If we really trust him we will trust him to be in charge. If we won’t let God be in charge then we really trust ourselves instead. If we trust God we will count on him to take away our sins and let him be in charge of our lives. And if we trust God like that then we are really descendants of Abraham and we can become like Jesus, free from the power of Satan and the fear of death, free from sin that hinders our relationship with God and full of the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome temptation.

That trust isn’t just a one time decision though. It’s something we have to continue to do if we want to become more and more like Jesus. If we want to experience freedom from Satan’s power and the fear of death we have to trust in what Jesus has done for us. If we don’t want sin to interfere with our relationship with God we have to continue to confess that sin and rely on Christ’s sacrifice to take it away as we turn from sin ourselves. And if we want to have power over the temptation to sin we need to trust in the Holy Spirit that gave Jesus victory instead of counting on our own will power or morality to keep from sinning.

When we look back on the life of Hudson Taylor and see how his love for the Chinese people motivated him to become like them so that they might know the love of God we are impressed. In becoming like them he showed his love and that helped many people come into a right relationship with God. But what Jesus did in becoming like us is so much more impressive. He not only became like us he became one of us and because he did that we can become like him in all the ways that God intends for us to be like him.

I hope as you celebrate this year you’ll remember just what Jesus did, that he became and remains truly human. I hope you’ll remember that he did it for a reason so that you could become like him. If you are already a descendant of Abraham because you’ve trusted in Jesus remember what he faced and that he understands you and wants to help you, remember what he’s done for

you and the power you have in him. Keep trusting in him to become more and more like him each day.

If you haven't trusted in Jesus what better time than Christmas to find out just what it means to become like Jesus by trusting in him. Talk to me or Pastor David or a friend who brought you, we'd love to tell you more about it. After all that's why we have Christmas in the first place, that's why Jesus became like us, so that we could become like him.