

# He Lived a Sinless Life

Incarnate: Why the Manger Matters

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Before we get started, could we just have a show of hands of all the people who have never sinned? Please raise your hand if you're morally perfect. Most of you passed the test. Give yourselves a pat on the back. If somebody says they're perfect, it's usually a sign to the rest of us that they're just the opposite. Think about it: all of the people who we think of as really holy don't see themselves that way. The most admired Christians are usually the ones who were most aware of their own sinfulness. Even the apostle Paul called himself the chief of sinners.

But Scripture tells us that one man, Jesus of Nazareth, was unlike these other people we admire. He claimed to be without sin. But the difference between him and anyone who might have raised their hand today is that he really *was* sinless. In John 8:46 he asks, "Which one of you convicts me of sin?"<sup>1</sup> He challenges anyone to bring a charge, but there's no case to be made against him, because he never sinned. We can find no instance in the four Gospels where he did. Even Pilate, the very man who sentenced him to death, says in John 18:38, "I find no guilt in him." Second Corinthians 5:21 says he "knew no sin." Jesus was not just a really good guy or a great moral teacher. He claimed to be much more—perfect God and perfect man.

The truth of that claim is something the Christian church has always believed. So my main goal today is not to convince you that Jesus *was* really sinless. He was. My goal is to convince you that it really matters. In fact, if Jesus was not *sinless* as a man, then he became man for no purpose. We've seen all these reasons why the manger matters in our Advent series, but none of it matters if Jesus did not live a sinless life. So my challenge to you today is this: cling to the sinless life of Christ like your spiritual life depends on it. There's too much at stake in this doctrine for us to forget it, to lose sight of it, or to let it go. We're going to look at three reasons to hold onto this truth that Jesus was sinless, and each is connected to an aspect of Christ's work on our behalf.

## 1) WE NEED A SINLESS SUBSTITUTE AND REPRESENTATIVE.

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The first reason is the most important and the most foundational. We should cling to the sinless life of Christ, first, because we need a sinless substitute and representative. Ok, these are some big words. What do I mean by them?

### *Why do we need a Substitute?*

When I say we need a substitute, I mean we need someone to die in our place. Why would that be necessary? Well, remember when I asked all the perfect people to raise their hands and there were none? None of us are morally perfect. All of us have sinned. But maybe you're thinking "Sure I'm not perfect, but I'm not that bad. I haven't done anything really serious. What's the big deal that we're not perfect?" Well, the Bible says it's a really big deal. In fact, Romans 6:23 says "the wages of sin is death." Even one sin is deserving of death. When we sin, we earn a wage, payment. We don't earn eternal life with God, we earn eternal death apart from God. And because God is perfectly just, there must be a penalty for sin. It would go against his own character to not give the proper payment for sin. So our only hope of living is for someone to die in our place: a substitute.

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

But what kind of substitute do we need? Well, it would have to be someone who didn't really deserve death himself. It would have to be someone whose death wasn't necessitated by his *own* sin. It would have to be someone who had never sinned, someone perfect. The problem is that no sinless human being exists. So, as Josh said in his sermon on the virgin birth, God had to do a new work of creation. God himself had to take on human flesh, and live a sinless life, and die in our place, so that we could be forgiven. That's what Jesus did for us. But if he was not sinless, his death was meaningless. It would have done no good for another sinner to die for us. That's why 1 Peter 3:18 says "For Christ also suffered once for sins, *the righteous for the unrighteous*, that he might bring us to God." We needed someone righteous to die in our place, as a substitute, so that we could be forgiven.

### ***Why do we need a Representative?***

Ok, so why do we need a representative? Isn't it enough that Jesus is our substitute? Well, we're forgiven because he's our substitute, but we need more than just forgiveness in order to spend eternity with God. Forgiveness just cancels out our sin. As Wayne Grudem says, it only gets us from morally negative to morally neutral. But we need to be morally positive—we need to be righteous—in order to be with God.

We're in the negative because we had a *sinful* representative. When Adam and Eve were first created, they were morally neutral—they hadn't done anything good or bad—and they had fellowship with God. But in order to remain in that right relationship with God, they had to obey God.<sup>2</sup> There was a requirement of righteousness. They were given a vocation, a calling to participate in God's work of ruling over his creation. They had some things to do and one thing not to do. And if they obeyed God, if they fulfilled their vocation, they would have everything they needed, they would live forever with God. But of course we know that's not how things panned out. The very first humans defaulted on the human vocation. They did the one thing God said not to do, and they didn't do the things he said to do. And Adam was a representative for the entire human race. His failure brought separation from God for all of us. We had a sinful representative; now we need a sinless one. We need more than just forgiveness, more than just moral neutrality. We need righteousness.

What kind of representative do we need? Well, we need someone to perfectly fulfill the human vocation, to do what the human race was meant to do all along but which we are unable to do. That's why Jesus had to live a full human life from infancy to adulthood. He could have been a sinless sacrifice from day one. But in order to represent us, he had to remain obedient, as Adam failed to do. Our representative would have to be fully human, but also fully obedient to God—a sinless human being. And since no human being is sinless, God had to become human and do it himself. Just as Adam represented the entire human race in his disobedience, Christ represents us in his obedience. Romans 5:18-19 says, "Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous." Because Jesus was obedient, we're not only forgiven, we're righteous before God. That's why we need not only his perfect death but his perfect life. As our substitute, he died the death we deserve. As our representative, he lived the life we were meant to. Jesus' death for us was meaningless if his life for us was not sinless. If you've trusted in Christ, then cling to this truth today: Jesus not only died for you; he lived a sinless life *for you*, and it's only because of what he's done that you're counted righteous before God.

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<sup>2</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 570-571

## 2) WE NEED A SINLESS EXAMPLE.

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Of course the sinless life of Jesus has significance not just for the life to come but also for our lives right now. We don't just need a substitute and representative; we need an example. That's the second reason to cling to this doctrine: We should cling to the sinless life of Christ because we need a sinless example.

### *Fully Human: Some Faulty Definitions*

The first question, though, is whether we even need another example. Our world has no shortage of people who are trying to show us or tell us how to live. Is Jesus just one more? That's what I thought as a kid, and that's why I thought I didn't need Jesus. If Jesus was just another guy trying to tell me how to be a good person, I could figure that out on my own. But eventually I came to realize that Jesus is unique. See, we don't just need another example; we need a completely new kind of example. In the person of Jesus Christ we have the revelation of God. He's Emmanuel, God with us. But we also have the revelation of true humanity. When we look at him we see something we've never seen before: a human person living in perfect obedience to the will of God.

Jesus is true humanity on display. He blows up some of our cultural definitions of what it means to be human. When we sin and don't follow God's will, don't we often say "I'm only human" or "It's human nature?" We act as if sinfulness is intrinsic to what it means to be human. Recently there was a singer from Wisconsin on *The Voice* who wrote a song saying just that. He sings about all the sinful things we do, and the chorus says "Don't know why we keep on doin' what we're doin' / I guess we're just human." But Jesus was fully human and *without* sin. Jesus demonstrates that sinfulness isn't intrinsic to humanity, it's the human condition. It's a distortion of how we were meant to be.

Because of the fall, we have some faulty definitions of what it means to truly be human and to truly live. And some of the definitions particular to our own culture are especially at-odds with the life that Jesus modeled. We think the good life is about autonomy, about self-expression, about doing what I want and not letting anyone else tell me how to live. I feel fully alive when I'm gratifying my desires, pursuing my aspirations, charting my own course. We're always looking for more autonomy and more self-determination. High schoolers, many of you are just waiting until you can get out of your parents' house and not have them telling you what to do all the time. Those of you in the workforce, maybe your job is just what you do to pay the bills so you can do what you want, and travel where you want, and do the things that really give you life. And of course there's the ultimate finish line—retirement—when you're officially done letting anyone tell you what to do or when to do it. Everything in our culture tells us this is good and right, that we're not truly alive unless we're self-seeking, self-directed, self-determined.

Jesus shows us a radically different way. He shows that authentic humanity can exist—in fact, can only exist—in complete obedience to the will of someone else, namely God the Father. In John 5:19, Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise." Do you realize how much that butts up against our own cultural values? Just imagine your friend was saying this to you. "Truly, I don't do anything just because I want to. I only do what I see my dad doing. Whatever my dad does, that's what I do." What would you say? "Dude, you have no life. That's no way to live." But that was Jesus' life. Jesus was not autonomous; he didn't do whatever he felt like; he didn't live for himself; rather, he did only what the Father showed him. And yet he was fully man. He

reveals humanness in a way that has not been seen since the fall: humanity without sin. Humanity in perfect obedience to God. A human will fully submitted to the will of *someone else*, and not degraded—not any less human—because of it.

### ***Fully Alive By Following Christ***

The significance of all this for us is that this new way of living, this new quality of life that we see in Jesus, can be ours as well. After all, we follow someone's example because we want what they have. Jesus says in John 10, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." Of course he's talking primarily about eternal life in heaven, but there's also a new kind of life right now for those who are in Christ. John 5:24-25 shows us that life is both a future and a present reality for those who believe. "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but *has passed* from death to life. Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, *and is now here*, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live." If we've believed in Jesus, there's new spiritual life in us because we've been united to Christ through the Holy Spirit. But he's also continuing to make us alive as we say no to sin and yes to the will of God.

Following Jesus involves reimagining what it means to truly live. And we don't get to define that for ourselves; we let God define human life. That's because we acknowledge that humanity was created, and created with a purpose. Let me put it this way: Things work best when what they do is in accordance with what they were created for. For example, a hammer is created to pound nails. If you try using a hammer to wash your dishes, things are bound to get broken. It's the same way with human beings. Abundant life is only found when we're living in accordance with our created purpose. It's in submitting our own desires to God's desires and our own will to God's will that we find true freedom, true fulfillment, and the fullest expression of ourselves, because *this is what we were made for*. From the very beginning, we were made to bear God's image, to live in perfect fellowship with him, to obey and glorify him. When we fail to do that, when we sin, there's a dissonance between what we do and what we were created for as human beings.

C. S. Lewis said it this way: "The place for which He designs [human beings] in His scheme of things is the place they are made for... When we want to be something other than the thing God wants us to be, we must be wanting what, in fact, will not make us happy."<sup>3</sup> In other words, sin isn't just rebellion against God, it's rebellion against our own created purpose and therefore the destruction of our own happiness. But we often buy into the same lie that Adam and Eve did: that God's holding out on us. That the good life can be ours if we just ignore his commands. Psalm 1:1-2 gives a different definition of the good life: "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; *but his delight is in the law of the Lord.*"

We'll never delight in obeying God until we realize that disobeying him is actually dehumanizing—that sin is not only offensive to our Creator but contrary to our created purpose. It doesn't just grieve God and damage others; it damages us and ultimately makes us miserable. Sin is far less than what we were made for, so living in sin isn't really living at all. But Jesus shows us a new way, the only way to be fully alive. We're not missing out on really living if we obey God. Jesus came that we may have life, and have it abundantly. He showed a new way and a new quality of life, and it can be ours as well. That's why we cling to this truth that he lived a sinless life.

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<sup>3</sup> Wayne Martindale and Jerry Root, *The Quotable Lewis*, 306

### *Our Tempted Example*

But maybe you think I'm a little bit idealistic, or a little naïve. Because this kind of life isn't the reality we experience every day is it? Maybe we see glimpses of life, but death and sin are an ever-present reality, both around us and within us. We'll never fully live up to his example in this life. We're forgiven, and we have eternal life, so should we even bother trying to obey God?

When that kind of cynicism comes up, we need to cling not only to the fact that Jesus was sinless but that he was tempted. He didn't model true humanity in a vacuum. He didn't show us how to obey God under perfect conditions. Adam nearly had that kind of set-up. Jesus did not. Adam was in a garden where God had provided everything he needed, yet he sinned. But in Matthew 4 we find Jesus in the desert, fasting for forty days while being tempted by Satan. He was likely close to the point of death from starvation, yet he did not sin. The conditions were perfect for disobedience, not obedience. He had every excuse to succumb—every excuse that we have and more. But he didn't take the easy way out, as we so often do when our conditions don't facilitate obedience to God. How often do we take the excuse? “Sorry I'm being irritable, I just had a long day at work.” We've even got a word for being angry with the built-in excuse of being hungry: “I'm just hangry.” We think that *if only the conditions were perfect*, then we could resist temptation. Jesus had every excuse, but he used none of them. He lived in the same broken, fallen world we do. He was tempted by the same devil. But he did not give in.

“Yeah but he was God, big whoop. What difference does it make that Jesus was sinless? He was God, and we're not.” Is Jesus really the example we need, or did he have it easy? Was he kind of like someone who was born a millionaire and tells you you can do anything if you just work hard? If you think that Jesus had it easy because he was God, let's look at one more passage. Just before Jesus is arrested and sentenced to death, he goes to the garden of Gethsemane to pray. Here we see Jesus in perhaps the greatest temptation of his life. In Matthew 26:36-39 it reads: “Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, ‘Sit here, while I go over there and pray.’ And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, ‘My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.’ And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, ‘My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.’”

The significance of this passage for the sinless life of Christ is that it shows us Jesus had a human will and human desires. One of those perfectly natural desires was the desire not to be tortured and killed on a cross. And besides the physical pain, there would be the anguish of bearing the guilt of all humankind, the wrath of God against sin, and the abandonment of his heavenly Father. He had every reason to disobey God's will for him. But what does he say? “Not as I will, but as you will.” He was not forced to do God's will; he chose it. He had a measure of freedom, but he used it to submit to the Father. He was not fully autonomous from the Father, but neither was he an automaton. He wasn't robotic in his obedience to the Father. He had a real human will and human desires.

In other words, Jesus was fully human and resisted temptation in a fully human way. The temptations of the devil didn't bounce right off him like a bullet bounces off a superhero. Jesus didn't fight temptation like Superman. No, he fought like a man. There's a world of difference between a Savior who is superhuman and one who is both fully God and fully human. Jesus did not face temptation with godlike powers, but with the weakness of human flesh, a human soul, human emotions, and a human will. He was tempted just like we are. But never once did he fail.

This is good news, because it means there's hope for us. There's hope for us, even though we don't live in the garden but in the constant presence of sin and death. It's hope not only for the hereafter but the here and now. There's a new kind of life that can be experienced even now, for those who are in Christ. Even now, in the weakness of human flesh. Even now, in a world intent on distorting and destroying human life. Even now, because Jesus stared Satan in the face, but did not sin. Even now, because Jesus stared death in the face, but said "Not as I will, but as you will." Even now, because Jesus not only paid it all in his death, he faced it all in his life. He faced it like a man, like a human. And never once did he sin. We cling to the truth of his sinless life because it means there's hope for us to overcome temptation as well.

### **3) WE NEED A SINLESS MEDIATOR.**

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There's one more reason we need to cling to the sinless life of Christ. We need a sinless mediator. Because Jesus was tempted but did not sin, he can mediate between us and God.

#### *A Mediator Who Brings Peace*

A mediator is someone who helps to communicate or negotiate between two parties. If two people have a dispute with one another, they might use a mediator to help come to an agreement. But what if the dispute isn't between two people but between people and God? A mediator between God and man is called a priest. People of all different religions appoint priests, because they know that we need someone to mediate between us and God. Often they offer sacrifices to try to resolve the hostilities between humans and God. Ever since the fall, there's been a conflict, a dispute, a breakdown of communication between humanity and God. But none of our human priests and none of our own efforts at mediation can resolve the issue.

Why? Because all of us, even priests, are sinful. We need a mediator who is himself sinless, who doesn't have his *own* dispute with God to deal with. Just like we needed a perfect sacrifice to take our place, we also need a sinless priest to offer it. Every human being is guilty before God, but Jesus is not. That's why Hebrews 7:26-27 says he's better than other priests: He's "holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself." He's not only our substitute, our sacrifice who died in our place; he's also our sinless high priest who offers the sacrifice of himself. We have no need of any other sacrifice or any other priest to bring peace between us and God, because this sacrifice was "once for all."

#### *A Mediator Who Knows Our Temptation*

But why does it say two verses before this that "he always lives to make intercession" for us? He's always pleading to the Father for us. It seems that we don't just need a mediator to resolve the hostilities but also to continually communicate between us and God. That's because the example Jesus showed us is not one we can follow on our own. We need help.

This means we also need a mediator who really understands us, who knows exactly the kind of help we need. We need someone who faced the very same struggles that we do. Hebrews 4:15-16 tells us Jesus is that kind of mediator, because he was not only sinless, but truly tempted. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." He can help us because he

was tempted like us. He wasn't superhuman. He was fully human. He knows weakness as well as we do—not in the sense of being sinful, but being limited, vulnerable, a target for the attacks of the enemy. And it's because of his familiarity with our weaknesses that he's qualified to be our great high priest, our perfect mediator.

This is a strange idea, because God already knows everything. But somehow it makes a difference that Jesus doesn't just know our experience from a distance, or merely intellectually, or secondhand. He knows what it means to be human in a fallen world up close and personal, from firsthand experience. He's felt hunger and thirst, fatigue, pain, and loss in his own body and psyche. He's felt the pull of the world and the devil in all of their seductive power, and he has resisted.

It makes a difference that he knows, mostly for our own assurance. There's a comfort and help that we can get only from people who have truly experienced the same thing we have, who really know. When you feel weak and overwhelmed by what the world throws at you, you need to know that he knows. When your fight against sin seems hopeless, you need to know that he knows. You need to know that Jesus weathered the same attacks you do. And because he did, we can “with *confidence* draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

### ***Suffering and Temptation***

If you still don't have confidence that he knows, consider this: Hebrews 2:18 says, “For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”

Why do we need a mediator who suffered when tempted? It must be because we ourselves are called to suffer when tempted. Notice what I'm not saying: we're not called to suffer when *sinning* but when tempted. There's a certain misery that comes from sin—from not living in accordance with what you were created to be. That's not the kind of suffering that Hebrews is talking about. It's talking about the suffering we experience from resisting temptation rather than giving in to it. And there's a feedback loop: suffering breeds temptation, and temptation (if resisted) breeds more suffering. You're never more tempted than when you're weak, and vulnerable, and suffering—when you have every excuse to give in. And temptation is most painful when you resist it to the bitter end rather than taking the easy way out.

That's the kind of suffering Jesus experienced. Jesus' own trials in the desert and in Gethsemane show us that the very nature of temptation is to offer us a way out of the suffering that's required to obey God. In the desert Satan says to Jesus, “Why go hungry when you can just turn these stones into bread? Why go through all of this trouble of living a human life when you can just bow down and worship me, and I'll give you all the kingdoms of the earth?” He faced the same temptation in Gethsemane: should I really obey God and go through all this suffering? He faced the same temptation even on the cross, when he was mocked by those who looked on, “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross” (Matt. 27:40). But he stayed. He remained obedient to what God the Father had called him to.

God has called us to a certain kind of life as well. And as we've already heard, it's the only way to really live, to be authentically human. It's the true definition of the good life. But if our definition of the good life doesn't allow for suffering, then it's a faulty one. Obedience to God doesn't reduce suffering in this life; in fact, it magnifies it. Because every temptation offers a way out of suffering. But that easy way out is also an off-ramp from the course that God wants for us, which is the only way to life. Jesus stayed the course. The question is, will you? Would you rather take the suffering than divert from the path of following him? Or have you been taking some off-ramps? It's less

painful to be stingy than generous. It's a lot easier to blame others than to admit your own faults. It's less painful to be selfish than selfless. It's easier to be negative than to be thankful. And it's more comfortable to follow the ways of the world than to stand for Christ. Will you choose pain and difficulty and discomfort if that's what it takes to follow Jesus? If you do, remember that he knows what it's like. Cling to that truth like your life depends on it. He suffered the same things, and that's why he can help us even now.

### *Conclusion*

If you weren't able to raise your hand earlier, if you're not perfect, you're in the same boat as the rest of us. You need a substitute to die the death you deserve. You need a representative to live the life you were meant to. You need an example to show you the way to live right now, and you need a mediator to ask for God's help to do it. The good news is that God has provided everything you need in one person: Jesus Christ. If you know you need Jesus—if you know that you haven't lived a sinless life but he has—you can come to him in faith right this very moment and not only be forgiven but righteous in God's eyes. But you can't have some of Jesus without all of him. He's not your substitute if he's not also the example you follow. He can't help you to be righteous unless you've already been counted righteous by faith. And he's nothing to you unless you cling to this amazing truth: that from the manger to the grave, Jesus lived a sinless life.