

*The*  
**PSYCHOLOGY**  
PRACTICAL HELP FOR  
LIVING IN RELATIONSHIP *of* **JESUS**



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## SECTION ONE

# INTRODUCTION TO THE PSYCHOLOGY OF JESUS



*“Who is this Jesus? Why is he different?”*

*– Pilate*

*Jesus Christ Superstar*

# Chapter One

## Mary Magdalene

Primary Concept:  
“Who am I?” and “What’s Wrong with Me?”  
Are Not Helpful Questions.

*Who are you?*

Go ahead. Think about it.

Let’s answer it together.

*First, what titles do you have? Mr., Mrs., Miss...*

I am a Reverend. (I try to get my congregation to call me the Right Reverend or Most High Pastor, but they refuse. Most drop all titles and just call me David.)

*What roles do you play? Include family roles and professional roles.*

I am a son, brother, husband, father, pastor, preacher, teacher, sometimes-coach, volunteer...

*What are your achievements?*

I’ve been married for nineteen years. I am the pastor of a growing church. I have a couple of master’s degrees.

*What are your failures?*

I keep a list in my mind of every job in my life I didn’t get. I have a wall of books that I started but never finished. I’ve preached quite a few flat sermons. I remember a few girls from high school that wouldn’t go out with me. I remember in middle school when I set the record for the slowest time to run a mile. My list has some obscure and silly shames that I’ve yet

to let go of. For example, I once asked an in-law if she was pregnant when she wasn't, and I bought a Milli Vanilli album even after I learned they lip synced it. My list goes on and on...

*What adjectives would you use to describe yourself?*

I came up with a dualistic list: saint/sinner, organized/messy, faithful/fearful, workaholic/lazy, patient/hurried...

*How much time have you spent in your life trying to answer "Who am I?"*

Much of my life has been a quest to answer this foundational question, "Who am I?" My search has taken me many places, to school, to work, to church. I looked for answers from parents, teachers, friends, acquaintances, strangers, libraries, the media, and God. I looked in what I own, what I do, what I think about myself, and what others say about me. The struggle to answer "Who am I?" has shaped my behavior and my relationships.

Psychology, as a field, has been centered on helping us in this search to answer, "Who am I?" Most people, when you mention psychology, think first of Sigmund Freud. Freud is still considered the father of modern psychology and he offered some of the widest known answers to "Who am I?" Freud, like many others in the field, focused on a variation to our "Who am I?" question. Because people came to Freud with problems, Freud wanted to help them answer the question they asked him, "What's wrong with me?"

As Freud studied and theorized about humanity, he had one main assertion. Freud concluded from his observations that, as humans, we have lots of things wrong with us. He said, *I have found little that is "good" about human beings on the whole. In my experience most of them are trash, no matter whether they publicly subscribe to this or that ethical doctrine or to none at all.* According to Freud, we are trashed by nature which has given us drives we can't satisfy, and personalities (split into the id, ego, and superego) which we can't calm. According to Freud, we are also trashed by our

nurture, usually our mothers, which potty trained us too soon or breast fed us too long.

Though the diagnoses have changed, the Freudian approach to problems is still popular. “Having a difficulty? The difficulty is you.” The diagnosis you hear may be, “You are obsessive compulsive; or you are bipolar; or you are chronically depressed; or you are hypersynomic; or you are schizophrenic.” Or the diagnosis may tell you that you have a disorder; “You have Delusional Disorder; or you have Dependent Personality Disorder; or you have Depressive Disorder; or you have Disruptive Behavior Disorder,” (and those are just the ‘D’s). The typical therapeutic cycle is: counsel, diagnose, treat (often medicate), and repeat.

Psychology has had no monopoly on diagnosing psyche or souls – the church was distributing diagnoses long before the science of psychology. Freud calling human beings “trash on the whole” is surprising when you discover he was Jewish because he sounds like a good Calvinist. John Calvin (1536) used the words *total depravity* in talking about human nature. The Westminster Confession (1646) in the Calvinist tradition, said that human nature is *utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil, and from it do proceed all actual transgressions.*

Psychology in the Freudian tradition and Christianity in the tradition of Calvin have diagnosed the condition of humanity and said, “There is something really wrong with us.”

The assertion of this chapter, this book, and many voices in psychology lesser known than Freud and in Christianity lesser known than Calvin, is not that Freud or Calvin, the psychologist or the preacher, came up with wrong, incorrect or defective answers. We may be ‘trash’ or ‘totally depraved’. The assertion is not that the diagnoses offered by professionals today aren’t accurate. They may be. The assertion is that all these diagnoses of mind and soul have not been and are not now especially helpful. The reason is simple. The answers these diagnoses offer come from a primary question of “Who am I?” which offers us little assistance in living life.

From the psychologist, we may hear that we are defective or disordered, but their diagnosis hasn't made us any less dysfunctional. From the preacher we may hear that we are depraved sinners, but their proclamation hasn't made us sin any less. The answers from psychologist and pastor alike may be accurate – it's just that their foundational questions: "Who am I?" and "What's wrong with me?" are not especially helpful. For two thousand years of Christianity and over two hundred years of psychology, so much energy has been spent asking the wrong questions.

Fortunately for us, those questions ("Who am I?" and "What's wrong with me?") weren't central questions for Jesus and play only a very small part in his psychology.

### Text

Before we go on to questions which play a more important role in the psychology of Jesus and how he approaches others, I want us to examine just how futile "Who am I?" and "What's wrong with me?" are for us and were for the followers of Jesus. The best example of their futility is found at the end of the gospels. I assume that the story of Jesus is not like a murder mystery to you and that you know how it ends already. So, beginning at the end, let's look at Jesus' followers, right before Easter, in John, chapter 20.

As you read this passage, imagine you are Mary Magdalene coming to the grave site, imagine you are John and Peter racing toward the tomb, and that you are the rest of the disciples hiding. You may want to read the verses a few times and imagine yourself as a different character each time.

As you read the passage, try and answer "Who am I?" as you think the character would.

John 20: *Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. <sup>2</sup> So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one*

whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” <sup>3</sup> Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. <sup>4</sup> The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup> He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. <sup>6</sup> Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, <sup>7</sup> and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. <sup>8</sup> Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; <sup>9</sup> for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. <sup>10</sup> Then the disciples returned to their homes.

<sup>11</sup> But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; <sup>12</sup> and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. <sup>13</sup> They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” <sup>14</sup> When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup> Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” <sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup> Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’ ” <sup>18</sup> Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

### **Concept in the text**

What did you think about as you imagined yourself as Mary? Peter? John? the other disciples? How did you feel? How would each answer “Who am I?” before going to the tomb on Easter morning.

For Mary Magdalene, Jesus was Rabbi, teacher, friend, leader and companion. Yet, just two days prior to this passage she had watched him die a painful death of torture on the cross. Soldiers had separated her from Jesus. While he died, she couldn't get to him or give him any relief. She would have saved him if she could, but she couldn't. All she could do was watch, pray, cry.

On the day of this passage, on Easter morning, she was on her way to the tomb. She was concerned about the rock which covered the entrance. She didn't know how she would move it. It might be an immovable separation for her. She was also worried about soldiers. They kept her from Jesus on the cross. They might be at the tomb and keep her from Jesus' body.

If she would have been asked on her way to the tomb, "Mary, who are you?" She would have likely used words like, "Weak. Powerless. Heartbroken. I wanted to save him but I couldn't. I wanted to help him but I couldn't."

While Mary watched Jesus die, the disciples had been hiding. They didn't see Jesus die. They hadn't been near him. They hadn't stood up for him. They had let him die without them. They had done nothing to try and save him. On the morning of the passage, Easter morning, if you were to ask them, "Who are you?" They would have likely said, "We are failures. We should have been with Jesus, but we ran. We are afraid. We are hiding. They came for Jesus and took him. They will probably come for us. We are weak. We are powerless. We couldn't stop them from taking Jesus. We won't be able to keep them from taking us."

Finally, besides Mary Magdalene and the disciples, what about Jesus? What about Jesus on Easter morning before sunrise? How would he have answered, "Who am I?" The answer is...he wouldn't. Here's where the "Who am I?" question falls apart. Jesus couldn't have answered it, as far as we can tell, before sunrise. The answer for Jesus wasn't many words like Mary or the disciples. The answer for Jesus was one word, a single word others would have to give for him. The word was 'dead.' "Who is Jesus?"

someone might ask. “Jesus is dead,” was the answer.

### The Concept in Depth

The problem with “Who am I?” as an approach to the human mind, the human soul, is that our answers turn out like the people’s in the text. Sooner or later we fail, we fall short. Sooner or later, there is some rock too big to move, some past too dark to erase. Even if we never experience one of those dark moments that questions character and sanity, sooner or later we will fail at the big evolutionary task. Instinct gives us all one challenge, to stay alive. We are wired with this internal goal – survival. All existing creatures want to keep on existing, and sooner or latter, all fail. No matter how successful we think we are at proving our identity, proving our worth, sooner or later we fail because sooner or later we will be unsuccessful at our life long quest of survival and die. Then, no matter how we have answered “Who am I?” with our titles, our roles, our adjectives, successes or failures, satisfactions or disappointments, sooner or later we won’t be able to answer “Who am I?” for ourselves. All answers will have to be given for us. Friends and others may eulogize us well. “He was a good man.” “She was a nice person.” “He was wealthy.” “She was powerful.” No matter how high the praise, all answers will be past tense – and past tense only. The only present tense answer allowed is, “She is dead.” “He is dead.” That was all anyone could say for Jesus. That’s all anyone will be able to say for us.

So, “Who am I?” is a fleeting, cursory, superficial, short-lived, passing, perfunctory, temporal, transitory, and all in all deficient question because none of our answers last.

Fortunately, Jesus offers a different approach. Unlike our exercise at the beginning of the chapter, Jesus did not answer “Who am I?” with a title. People tried to call him “Messiah” all through the gospel of Mark, and Jesus told them to keep quiet. He did not answer with a position or role. He didn’t define himself by achievements or failures. He had no résumé. He was not impressed with others attempts at self definition, no

titles or achievements stirred him. No record of failures brought to him by others made an impact. Jesus was secure in his understanding of himself and of others. From this confidence, he went forward into other questions which helped him, which serve as the foundation for the psychology of Jesus, and which will help us once we see them. In the next chapter, we'll examine how Jesus answered, "Who am I?" for himself and in the rest of the book we'll look at the more helpful questions.

### Application

Before we move onto the more important questions in the Psychology of Jesus, let's examine some contemporary examples of the futility of diagnosing others. We all, not just preachers and psychologists, diagnose others – daily! And, ironically, we diagnose others for the same reasons psychologists, preachers, and physicians offer their diagnoses – to be helpful. We offer diagnoses to give people a chance to change, an opportunity to be better, to improve, to grow, to own their shortcomings and be changed. We offer them, yet with little positive effect.

Read the following story. As you read it, remind yourself, the teacher is choosing to diagnose this little girl, the teacher believes, in the girl's best interest...

*Margaret frantically raced into her classroom after recess, late again. Ms. Garner was furious. "Margaret!" she shouted, "we have been waiting for you! Get up here to the front of the class, right now!"*

*Margaret walked slowly to the teacher's desk, was told to face the class, and then the nightmare began.*

*Ms. Garner ranted, "Boys and girls, Margaret has been a bad girl. I have tried to help her to be responsible. But apparently, she doesn't want to learn. So we must teach her a lesson. We must force her to face what a selfish person she has become. I want each of you to come to the front of the room, take a piece of chalk, and write something bad about Margaret. Maybe this experience will motivate her to become a better person. Her classmates came as instructed. You can imagine some of the things they wrote. Margaret remembered*

them for years.

This story may seem overly violent. If you are so many years from school, especially middle school, ask a young teen if she or he can identify with Margaret. Find a school teacher and ask if the story sounds familiar.

The main point of sharing with you Margaret's story is this – Margaret's teacher and her class thought they were helping Margaret. They were trying to help her by telling her she was *fat*, *stupid*, and *lazy*. We approach friend and family often with a diagnosing label in mind trying to be helpful, "Let me help you see what's wrong with you."

Fortunately, for us and all the Margarets and their teachers, too, in Jesus, we see another approach, one illustrated in this next encounter.

Imagine you are a counselor. A family comes to you concerned about their son. He has been abusing himself by burning cigarettes into his arm. Without meeting him, how do you imagine him in your mind? Do you have any answers for "Who is he?" "What is wrong with him?" As a point of reference, the most frequent psychological diagnosis for people who self mutilate (cut, burn, bang their heads, pull their hair, pick at skin, bite self and hit themselves) is, "You have Borderline Personality Disorder."

Read the following encounter with a young man, his family, and the Family Systems Therapist Carl Whitaker. The encounter was observed by a group of professional counselors.

*The "patient," a young, icy paranoid boy of 18, was burning holes in his arms with a cigarette while his sophisticated professional parents talked in pleasantries about the cool summers of Martha's Vineyard. Carl, his shoes off, naïve, rambling, incomprehensible, told stories about fishing with night crawlers. He said he liked to squish them in his fingers before putting them on the hook. As he talked on, he took hold of the dad's hands, rubbed them, until they were red, then reached out and put his hand on the boy's shoulder and told him. "That's the craziest way of getting warm I ever saw. Put the cigarette away." In the moment of uncertainty as to what would happen next, Carl was firmly massaging the boy's shoulders as they began to quiver and pulsate with his sudden sobs.*

*When Carl also began to cry, even the most intellectual of the professors in the audience covered their faces while coughing in order to remove an unprofessional tear.*<sup>2</sup>

Whitaker doesn't diagnose the teenager in the typical fashion. He doesn't spend any time at all labeling what is wrong with the young man or the family. Instead, he looks at something entirely different. Whitaker examines not what's within them but what's between them. That's where we will find a much better focus for all our energy, not what's within us, but what's between us.



### **Challenge for Us**

In the psychology of Jesus, Jesus doesn't spend a lot of time on the questions, "Who am I?" and "What's wrong with me?" or "Who are you?" and "What's wrong with you?" The challenge for us is to see where the diagnosis of self and others has led to pain, and then search for a better, healthier, more productive approach.

### **Reflection**

Read the following quotes. How do they relate to the psychology of Jesus and the first encounter with Jesus mentioned above.

*Once you label me you negate me.* – Soren Kierkegaard

*It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see.*

– Henry David Thoreau

*When you love, give it everything you have got.*

*And when you have reached your limit,*

*give it more, and forget the pain of it.*

*Because as you face your death,  
it is only the love that you have given and received which will count,  
All the rest: the accomplishments, the struggle, the fights  
will be forgotten in your reflection.  
If you have loved well  
then it will all have been worth it.  
And the joy of it will last you through the end.  
But if you have not,  
death will always come too soon and be too terrible to face.*

– Richard Allen



**Exercise:**

Make a list of people who have given you different labels or diagnoses in your life.

Beside each person's name, write the label you heard from them.

Beside the label write 'help,' 'hinder,' or 'both' as you determine whether the diagnosis has been a help, hindrance, or both to your personal growth.

Now, go back through your list. Put an X through any labels you wish to leave behind and circle those labels you wish to carry forward.

Now repeat the exercise with labels not from others but labels you give yourself. Often, the harshest labels we have to deal with come from ourselves.