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The Saint

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Abstract

Today, within the Christian culture, the celebrity has replaced the idea of the saint. Very strangely, the celebrity is the dire opposite of the classic notion of the saint. Even more strikingly, the idea of celebrity runs contrary to Jesus' teachings. Of course, in Jesus' day, there were no celebrities, as we know them today. What passed for celebrities in his day were the rich and wealthy. They were the ones that everyone looked up to and admired, but Jesus tells us that they are actually the most unfortunate, and that wealth is the most dangerous of any of the idols that possess us and keep us from the fullness of life God has for us.

Keywords

saint, celebrity, wealth, identity, Jesus' teachings

Having been raised a Catholic, I was told of the saints. Saints were people who the Church was sure were in heaven. Furthermore, saints were also people who were very different from the rest of us while here on Earth. Years later I became a born again Christian and was told by Evangelicals that all Christians were saints. All Christians were going to heaven and all Christians were different from the rest of humanity. That made sense to me then but twenty-seven years later things appear quite different. When I consider the matter today, the saint does appear to be very different from the rest of us.

Of course, in contemporary American culture it is not the saint but the celebrity that we admire and see as different. The reason for this is that mass media gives the celebrity a notoriety that goes way beyond that of the average person. Since the celebrity is identifiable by a great multitude of people, their identity appears to be more substantial than the rest of us whose identities are established by perhaps only the handful of people who make up our rather small world. Certainly this idea that one person's identity is greater than the rest because they are identifiable by more people is an

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illusion, but it is an illusion deeply entrenched in contemporary culture.

In fact, this illusion is so deeply entrenched in our social reality that it should not be surprising that the idea of the special Christian has become the celebrity Christian rather than the saintly Christian. Evidence of this is all around us. At a recent local prayer breakfast, the guest speaker was a movie star who had, two years previously, had a conversion experience. He was chosen because many people would be interested in his testimony, not because of his saintliness, but because of his celebrity. Many churches that have extensive standards that must be met in order for a person to be a ministering member, ironically would invite a celebrity to their pulpit with little reservation. Some time ago, I voiced a disagreement to something a television preacher was saying. My mother-in-law's response was that I was not on T.V., and he was. Obviously, his opinion was more authoritative, not because of what he said but because of his celebrity.

Today, the celebrity has replaced the saint. Go to any bookstore and you will see that the books that purport to instruct us in the Christian life are authored by celebrities rather than saints. Publishers know that in order to sell a lot of books, the author has to be identifiable by a great many people. Consequently, television preachers, sports stars, and every other imaginable celebrity are the ones from whom we take our spiritual direction. Sadly, their spiritual authority comes from their celebrity rather than their saintliness. This is our fault as much as it is the fault of our culture. Indeed, what we recognize and revere about a person is their celebrity status. We somehow attribute to them not only a greater identity but a greater authority as well. Baseball players tell us what coffee to drink and movie stars what credit card to use. How strange! It is, however, more than simply strange when celebrities are the ones we look to in order to understand how to live the Christian life.

What is especially dangerous about the celebrity replacing the saint is that the nature of the celebrity is the very opposite of that of the saint. While the celebrity draws their identity from the notoriety that masses of people provide, the saint draws her identity from God alone. Unlike the celebrity, and all who desire to be celebrities and have their identities established by great numbers of people, the saint is one who rejects such an identity and continually returns to the fact that they are who God says they are, no more and no less. The saint repeatedly turns from the identity others attempt to impose upon her and only identifies herself as God's beloved daughter. The saint sees the notoriety and prestige that the celebrity has and the rest of us seek as an illusion. In contrast to the celebrity who employs publicists to maintain and increase that illusion, the saint rejects such an illusion.

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Of course, in addition to the obvious dangers of our following the celebrity Christian rather than the saintly Christian, there is also the enormous danger to the celebrity herself. The fact that she is identified by a great many people, who really do not know her, can provide her with an identity that is very different from who she really is. Since our identity or sense of who we are is largely based upon our relationship and interaction with others, it is dangerous to establish an identity based upon relationships with people who really do not know us. Such an identity is bound to produce a less than genuine and healthy notion of identity.

An identity established by a great many people has the illusion of being more substantial than the identity of the average person, but, as substantial as it may appear, it is still a false identity in that people who really do not know us establish our identity. By contrast, the saint's identity is the least substantial in that it is founded upon one person alone, but it is our true identity because that one person is the only one who truly does know us. The saint knows that the only one who truly does know us is God, and therefore our identity ultimately has to be based in our relationship with him. This is what makes the saint so different not only from the celebrity, but from the rest of us as well. While we form an identity out of our relationships with those people who make up our small worlds, and the celebrity out of their relationship with the masses, the saint knows that there is only one whose notice really matters. There is only one who really knows who we are and only one who can provide the ultimate identity we seek.

It is not easy to maintain such a saintly focus, even if we claim to have an intimate and defining relationship with God. That is because it is easy to slip into the identity others impose upon us rather than who we are in God. It is easy because for most Christians what others know about us is our good, moral behavior, our passion for the things of God, or our fruitful ministries. We like to think of ourselves the way others think of us because we have fooled them into believing that we are the false identity we have created. God, however, identifies us at our core of who we really are. At our core we are his creation rather than our own. We are his beloved daughters and sons, no more and no less. Furthermore, God wants us to identify ourselves as he identifies us, and he wants us to relate to him and other human beings out of that identity. Without such an identity in God, we all too easily fall under the allure of the celebrity whose identity looks considerably more substantial than the rest of humanity who pass through life without much notice.

There is another factor, which adds enormously to our attraction to celebrity, and what makes the identity of the celebrity the model to which so many of us aspire. That other factor is wealth, which usually goes hand in hand with celebrity. In an advanced market economy,

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someone who is well known has the ability to sell merchandise to a great many people. An Olympic medalist becomes a celebrity and consequently has the ability to sell breakfast cereal in a way that the rest of us do not. Wealth is almost a natural consequence of celebrity, and wealth, in our society, is the great reward for climbing its ladder of success. The problem with such an ascent, however, is that as we acquire more wealth with each rung of the ladder, we get more and more upon which to build the illusion of an identity apart from God. It is for this reason that Jesus so vehemently speaks against wealth.

- Jesus' Teachings -

In his teachings, Jesus never warns us of the danger of celebrity, but that is because in the ancient world, there was no mass media and therefore the idea of celebrity as it exists today was nonexistent. In the ancient world the special people with the desirable identities were people of wealth. Without mass media to make people appear larger than life, wealth alone produced that illusion. Like the celebrity of today, however, those who possessed wealth in the ancient world were admired and thought to be fortunate. Jesus, however, tells us that they are not the fortunate ones. In fact, their wealth, and the identity that it produced, seems to be the very thing that puts them in hell. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus says,

> There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames. But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.[1]

In this parable, which amounts to Jesus' most extensive teaching about hell, he tells us that hell is a place of torment, but it is not clear

[1] Luke 16:19–26.

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why the people there are in torment, nor is it clear that God is the one who is punishing them. The only thing we are told is that the man in hell was rich and lived well. So is the point of the parable that riches are the cause of his torment? That is certainly not the typical perspective of most television ministries or American politicians who have incorporated religion into their political platforms. According to their version of the Gospel, God blesses us with wealth. That, however, is very different from what Jesus preached. Jesus very specifically tells us not to store up treasure on earth "where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourself treasure in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consume and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."[2]

In other places, Jesus is even more critical of wealth. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus says, "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation,"[3] and in all three of the synoptic Gospels, Jesus, in explaining the parable of the sower, tells us that the seed that "was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of *wealth* [my emphasis] choke the word, and it yields nothing."[4] It is also in the synoptic Gospels that Jesus tells us, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."[5] In addition, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus tells a parable about a man who sought wealth rather than God.

> The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.[6]

Jesus' point is that God alone is our source of security and rest, and to try to find it anywhere else is both idolatrous and foolish. Jesus further points out the idolatrous nature of wealth when he tells us that we cannot serve two masters. He says very specifically that the two masters are God and wealth.

[2] Matt. 6:19–21.
[3] Luke 6:24.
[4] Matt. 13:22; also see Mark 4:19; Luke 8:14.
[5] Matt. 19:24; also see Mark 10:23–25; Luke 18:24.
[6] Luke 12:16–21.

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> No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.[7]

It is hard to find another subject against which Jesus so adamantly preaches. His teachings against sexual immorality do not compare with his teachings against wealth. We do not admit homosexuals into our churches but rich men are welcome in spite of all of Jesus' teachings. Of course, we live in a society that is founded upon wealth or capital. So how do we resolve the teachings of Jesus with our cultural values that are so deeply tied to wealth?

Apologists for our socio-economic system are quick to point out that it is not wealth that is evil but the love of it.[8] There is some truth to this since poor people can love wealth and lust after it even in its absence. The poor can worship money, just as the powerless can lust after power, and the nobodies can dream of being somebody. It can still be the idol we worship. Therefore, we quote Paul's letter to Timothy and stress the fact that it is "the love of *money* (my emphasis) [that] is the root of all kinds of evil."[9] Consequently, if it is the love of money rather than money itself, we can then see ourselves as guiltless because it is to define and understand love in a way that does not describe our relationship to money. But although it might be easy to convince ourselves that we do not *love* money, it is not so easy to convince ourselves that we do not identify with money, or that we are not identified by it. As we have seen, our identity is to be in God alone, but it is very difficult in this culture to avoid being identified by money.

In a capitalistic culture, money is the way we measure the worth or value of a thing. In addition to being a means of exchange and a source of surplus, the other function of money is that it serves as a measure of value. How good is that suit or car? The monetary price tells us the quality of the thing. Likewise, a person's wealth tells us the worth of that person. Of course, this is an illusion but we can easily get caught up in it and measure ourselves and others by such a standard. The illusion of wealth, like that of celebrity, easily entangles us and keeps us form the fullness of the Gospel. Just as celebrity gives us value and a sense of identity apart from God, so too does wealth.

The saintly solution to this dilemma is not what we might think. True, we may picture the saint as a reclusive ascetic who avoids both notoriety and possessions, but that is not necessarily the Jesus solution. Jesus prescribes the same solution for all sin. The solution

[7] Matt. 6:24.
[8] 1st Tim. 6:10.
[9] Ibid.

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is repentance. That is, every time we find ourselves under the sway of this powerful illusion by imagining that we can find value, security, and identity in things like celebrity and wealth, we need to repent or turn back toward God.

Jesus came into the world to rescue us from the hellish existence that things like celebrity and wealth so easily create. He tells us that we are to find our real worth in the fact that God is our father and nothing can separate his love from us. We can separate ourselves from his love, however, by choosing to follow the gods of this world, of whom Jesus tells us wealth is chief. We find salvation when we turn away from such a false god and back to the only God in whom we might find our true identity. It is only our repentance and turning back to God as our source of worth and identity that can save us from the hellish existence we create for ourselves by making wealth, and all that comes with it, our master. As with the rest of Jesus' teachings, his teachings on the subject of wealth are intent upon bringing us to repentance in order that we might receive forgiveness and by receiving much forgiveness for falling prey to such a false source of identity, we would eventually become forgiving people after his likeness.

This is what the saint understands and equally what makes them so different from the rich and celebrated. What makes them different is not that their pious nature makes them immune to the pull of such strong idols. It is quite the opposite. Unlike the rest of us, the saint is more acutely aware of the sinister nature of the idols of this world and therefore lives in a more constant state of repentance and turning back toward God. The saint is different from the rest of us, not in their being sinless, but in their awareness of their sin and need of repentance. Unlike the rest of us who try to cover or excuse our sin in order to appear sinless, the saint exposes her sin in order that she might become evermore aware of God's forgiveness and love.

Likewise, unlike the rest of us who seek celebrity and wealth in order to make us bigger than we would otherwise be, the saint seeks littleness. This littleness is what is behind true humility, and consequently, the kind of pride that Scripture continually warns us against is rooted in its opposite: bigness. We speak of pride as something that puffs us up, and indeed, that is exactly what happens. We are puffed up, and we appear to have a big identity, but that is the lie – the illusion of the false self. The real self – the self of the saint – lies not in the facade of who we would like others to think we are, but in who we really are at the core of our being. When all else is stripped away, we are no more than God's creation – God's beloved daughters and sons. The way we get to that core, and our true identity, is always a way of descent. In contrast to the ladder of success our culture tells us we should climb, the saint's journey is downward. Indeed, we enter heaven as we descend into the littleness of the child who is aware

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of nothing but their father's love.[10] This will be our heavenly state, but the saint, unlike the rest of us, desires to live as close as possible to that state now.

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[10] Mark 10:15, Luke 18:17.

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