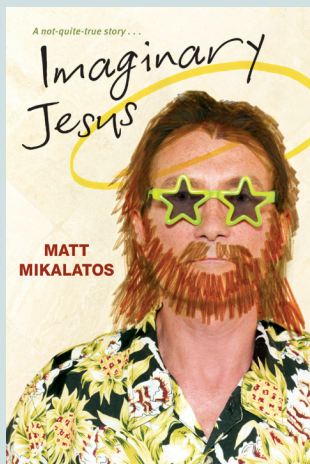


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## Imaginary Jesus

A hilarious, fast-paced, not-quite-fictional story that's unlike anything you've ever read before. When Matt Mikalatos realizes that his longtime buddy in the robe and sandals isn't the real Jesus at all, but an imaginary one, he embarks on a mission to find the real thing.



MATT MIKALATOS received his BA in writing from the University of California Riverside. Matt provides leadership to the international ministries of Crusade's northwest region. Matt has published articles in *Discipleship Journal*, *The Wittenburg Door*, *Relief*, and *Coach's Midnight Diner*. Matt and his wife live near Portland, Oregon. They have three beautiful daughters.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Q: What is going on here? What is this so-called discussion guide?

Matt: This is a document full of questions that you can discuss with friends or strangers about the book *Imaginary Jesus*.

Q: And what makes you think that you are qualified to write a document like this one?

Matt: Well, I wrote the book, so it seems like that might be one qualification.

Q: We'll see about that. And why do you think I might like this discussion guide?

Matt: Maybe you have a book club and you're looking for a book to talk about, but you don't want to make up your own questions. Or I've heard that some people are reading the book with their Sunday school class, or a Bible study group, or their neighbors or coworkers, or I even heard that the "We Hate Matt Mikalatos Fan Club" used the book for a doorstep, and they printed off some discussion guides to use for napkins at their fondue party. In other words, you can use this however you like. It's a service to you, the reader.

Q: Was it chocolate fondue or cheese fondue?

Matt: Well, I wasn't invited. But I heard it was cheese.

Q: Why on earth would you write a discussion guide for a novel? Shouldn't fiction stand on its own?

Matt: It certainly should. This discussion guide is for people who want to explore their own opinions about *Imaginary Jesus*, the real Jesus, and whatever else they can sneak into a conversation with their friends. It's about your opinions, thoughts, and reflections, not mine.

Q: I noticed, though, that you included your own commentary on some of the topics.

Matt: True. These "sidebar" commentaries are intended purely to give you a little more insight into my thoughts . . . as if I were hanging out at your book group or study with you. Feel free to discuss those, too, and to agree or disagree with them.



# Imaginary Jesus: Matt Mikalatos

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED

**Q:**What if I don't want to use this discussion guide?

Matt: I hope that you won't read or use it if you don't want it.

Q: Why don't you just come to my discussion group and talk about it with us? It seems like that would be easier.

Matt: Invite me and I'll see if I can make it. As you may have noticed in the book, I like talking about myself, Jesus, and yes, this book. I'll come if I can.

Q:Are there spoilers in this discussion guide?

Matt: A few. It's broken into chunks by chapter, so you can see what section the questions cover. I would suggest reading that section and then looking at the discussion guide afterwards.

Q: When are you going to stop blabbing on and on so we can get to the actual discussion guide?

Matt: Right now. Thanks for reading *Imaginary Jesus*, and I hope that this discussion guide is helpful as you process your thoughts about the book.

Q:Are you finished yet? Man, you talk a lot.

Matt: Yes, I'm done. Thanks for your time.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## CHAPTER 0-2

1. When showing Matt that his Jesus is imaginary, Pete starts by picking on Jesus' clothes. Do you think it matters whether a modern-day Jesus wears a robe rather than jeans and a T-shirt?
2. When showing Matt that his Jesus is imaginary, Pete starts by picking on Jesus' clothes. Do you think it matters whether a modern-day Jesus wears a robe rather than jeans and a T-shirt?
3. Pete says in chapter zero that he chooses his words carefully, yet we see him using curse words in that chapter, as well as at least one vulgar reference to prostitutes in a later chapter. If he's choosing his words so carefully, why does he use this coarse language when speaking to Matt? **(SUPPLEMENT)**
4. Have you ever prayed for a parking space or that you wouldn't get a parking ticket? Where do you rate "inability to fix my parking tickets" on the scale of whether your God is worth following?



# Imaginary Jesus: Matt Mikalatos

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED

5. How do you feel about Pete buying alcohol? Did it surprise you? Why alcohol instead of grape juice or something else? How does that compare to Matt's comments about alcohol at the beginning of chapter two? **(SUPPLEMENT)**

6. What do you think about Matt's description of how to follow Jesus in chapter two? How would you answer Pete's challenge to describe in five minutes how to follow Jesus?

7. In this chapter, Pete says he is not imaginary. What do you think he means by that?

## CHAPTER 3–6

1. In chapter three Pete says that Matt is afraid of his imagination. What does Pete mean by that? Are there reasons to be afraid of one's imagination? Are there positive uses for it? **(SUPPLEMENT)**

2. Have you ever had an invitation to follow someone, like Sam's invitation from Ruth in chapter three? If so, what did you decide? Was it a difficult decision? Why or why not?

3. Chapter four portrays Y'shua as an ugly, twisted little man. How did you feel about that? Would it change anything in your perception of Jesus if this was true?

4. The story of Jesus healing Peter's mother-in-law comes from the Bible, in Luke chapter 4. Why do you think Luke would include this story? Why is this story significant?

5. What do you think about Daisy's definition of a disciple in chapter six?

6. Given Pete's limited knowledge of Jesus at the time of the miraculous catch of fish, are you surprised that he chose to follow him? If there was no promise of eternal life, would you choose to follow Jesus?

7. Where are some places that your imaginary Jesus would never go?

## CHAPTER 7–11

1. In chapter three Pete says that Matt is afraid of his imagination. What does Pete mean by that? Are there reasons to be afraid of one's imagination? Are there positive uses for it?

2. Have you ever interacted with a Jesus like Magic 8 Ball Jesus, Testosterone Jesus, Perpetually Angry Jesus, Harley Jesus, or Legalist Jesus? If so, share a story about that interaction. If not . . . make one up! **(SUPPLEMENT)**

3. Does Sandy's story in chapter nine change your opinion of her previous vocation? Do you think her story is a common or uncommon one?

4. What does Sandy mean by "we were all whores before we met him"?

5. What is the author's point in making fun of the way that King James Jesus talks? Do you think that new translations of Scripture are necessary as word usage changes over time, or do we have enough translations? **(SUPPLEMENT)**



# Imaginary Jesus: Matt Mikalatos

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED

6. What might you say in an angry letter to Matt about the comments concerning men's retreats in this book? Are you planning to write such a letter?

## CHAPTER 12–16

1. Have you ever made a deal with God or Bargain Jesus? What was the deal? In retrospect, do you think it was a good thing or bad thing to do?
2. Share your thoughts about the conflicts that could come about between Liberal Social Services Jesus and Conservative Truth-Telling Jesus.
3. In chapter twelve, Political Jesus says that “some imaginary Jesuses are better than others.” Discuss.
4. The story of Jesus healing Peter's mother-in-law comes from the Bible, in Luke chapter 4. Why do you think Luke would include this story? Why is this story significant?
5. What do you think about Daisy's definition of a disciple in chapter six?
6. Given Pete's limited knowledge of Jesus at the time of the miraculous catch of fish, are you surprised that he chose to follow him? If there was no promise of eternal life, would you choose to follow Jesus?
7. Where are some places that your imaginary Jesus would never go?
8. Why does Matt become so angry at Televangelist Jesus' assertion that those who truly have faith will never be sick again?
9. It can be hard to distinguish story from autobiography in this book. Do you think the healing in the bedroom in chapter sixteen actually happened, or is it an invented incident for the sake of the book? **(SUPPLEMENT)**

## CHAPTER 17–20

1. In chapter seventeen Matt shares a story of God generously answering prayer by providing a trashed guitar and a mysterious stranger to play it. Do you think that God would bother with something like this? **(SUPPLEMENT)**
2. In chapter eighteen Matt says that hospitals are a “testimony to the fact that death exists.” What do you think of that description? Is it accurate or unfair? What is your experience with hospitals?
3. In chapter nineteen Matt begins to deal with the loss of his child and wrestles with the question, “If God is both good and powerful, why would he allow my child to die?” What would you say to Matt at a time like this?
4. Matt takes the position that God is both good and powerful, which leaves him with an inability to comprehend God's inaction when his child dies. If God truly cares for human beings and has the power to intervene, what possible motivations could he have to allow pain, suffering, and death in this life?
5. Matt meets three possible “answers” to this question on the top of Mount Hood. Just from their names, which one is your favorite to win the inner tube competition?





# Imaginary Jesus: Matt Mikalatos

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED

6. Is it disrespectful for the author to approach this theological question in the guise of an inner-tubing competition? Is there a different way you'd prefer to explore a question like this?

## CHAPTER 21–24

1. Based on their own descriptions, would you choose Meticulous Jesus, Free Will Jesus, or Can't-See-the-Future-Because-It's-Unknowable Jesus?
2. Motorcycle Guy says he was hoping Matt would come down the mountain alone. What does he mean by this?
3. Which is more palatable to you: that God chooses our sufferings or that God allows our sufferings? Which do you think is true?
4. Imaginary Jesus says that when Matt prays without waiting for God's response, he is praying to himself. Have you ever felt that you were praying to yourself instead of to God? Have you ever felt that you prayed and God didn't hear you?
5. What do you think about Daisy's definition of a disciple in chapter six?
5. Elder Hardy says that he doesn't drink certain beverages because they are bad for his health, but he gladly scarfs down a chimichanga. Can you think of similar inconsistencies in your belief system or the beliefs of someone you know? **(SUPPLEMENT)**

## CHAPTER 25–29

1. Do you think that God wrote the Bible? How about the Book of Mormon? Do you think he might choose to write another book sometime in the future? Why or why not?
2. Have you ever felt cornered into a strange position (like Elder Hardy's contention that God made grammar mistakes) to keep your beliefs consistent?
3. Matt references the Nicene Creed, which says that Jesus was both completely man and completely God. What does this mean? Do you think this is true?
4. In chapter twenty-six Matt realizes that the Jesus at the atheist Bible study was not imaginary at all. Did this surprise you? What did you think about this Bible study?
5. Sandy and Matt talk about how Shane (the atheist) seems to be following Christ before believing in him. Pete says similar things earlier in the book. Do you think it's possible to be a follower of Christ before becoming a Christian?
6. The atheists seem to think that if they saw miracles, they would believe, but Matt thinks that miracles are not enough. What do you think? Would miracles help you to believe in God?
7. In chapter twenty-seven some similarities between the origins of Islam and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are pointed out. Why do you think these similarities exist between these two very different religions? Can any conclusions be drawn from this?
8. What was the point of the parable of the cars? How about the parable of Zombie Boy and Werewolf Boy? **(SUPPLEMENT)**



# Imaginary Jesus: Matt Mikalatos

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED

### CHAPTER 30–33

1. Portland Jesus and Shane disagree about why Jesus died on the cross and whether it has anything to do with taking someone else's punishment. Do you think Jesus took someone else's punishment when he was killed? **(SUPPLEMENT)**
2. Portland Jesus and Shane disagree about why Jesus died on the cross and whether it has anything to do with taking someone else's punishment. Do you think Jesus took someone else's punishment when he was killed?
3. Shane also thinks that the renewed interest in service projects in Africa and elsewhere are a reflection of our current American culture rather than Christian theology. What do you think? Is that an overstatement or understatement?
4. Did you recognize any of the imaginary Jesuses from chapter thirty-two? If you were writing this chapter, what imaginary Jesuses might you add to the list?
5. Why does Pete make Matt take his shoes off when he enters the labyrinth?

### CHAPTER 34–39

1. Daisy tells Matt that he doesn't hear from God because his head is full of static. What causes static in your life?
2. Mary and Pete share briefly about the first Communion for those who had lived life with Jesus. What sorts of things do you think Peter shared at his first Communion? How about the apostle John? If you are a follower of Christ, how could you have a more significant time of remembrance at the next opportunity for Communion?
3. Why would the president of the United States bother to clean your bathroom? How would you feel if something like that happened to you? Does that change the way you look at the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet?
4. When Matt takes Communion at the center of the labyrinth, he sees a "procession of the ages." What is the author implying about the nature of Communion?
5. In the face of his encounter with Jesus in the labyrinth, Matt sets aside his question about the death of his baby. Did you find this satisfying or frustrating? What was it about this encounter that gave him peace about his question?
6. What is the significance of the apostle John being described as having papery, ink-covered skin?
7. Matt tries to create art projects to express his experience in the labyrinth. How would you express profound experiences? Through the written word? art? song? some act of service? something completely different?
8. What is the difference between someone who follows Jesus for what Jesus has done in the past and someone who follows Jesus because of his past, present, and future actions? **(SUPPLEMENT)**
9. In the final chapter, Houdini Dog appears, which seems to be a big deal. In fact, Houdini Dog is mentioned consistently throughout the book. Is there a theme or metaphor being woven into the story through the use of Houdini Dog?



# Imaginary Jesus: Matt Mikalatos

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED

## NOW THAT YOU'VE FINISHED THE BOOK

1. Matt suggests several times that our imaginary Jesuses are reflections of our own culture, upbringing, or teaching. Are there things about your idea of who Jesus is that could be attributed to this?
2. There appear to be three types of people in the book: real people (Matt, Shane, Sandy, the elders), imaginary people (various forms of Jesus), and people who are real but "complicated" (Daisy, Pete, Motorcycle Guy, John). What clues do we have about the nature of this third category of people? Why can some real people see them, while others can't?
3. This book never lays out a systematic "Here's how to know the real Jesus." What hints do we get in the book of how to know the real Jesus? What are some actions you could take to remove imaginary Jesuses in your life and find the real one?
4. The last two words of the text reveal a new stage of life for Matt and his family. What do you suppose is his reaction to this? Does it change his previous search for answers about his wife's miscarriage? Would this revelation alter his understanding of who Jesus is?
5. What was your favorite moment in the book? What was your least favorite? Were there parts that made no sense to you? Were you offended by anything in the book? Did you get any new insights into yourself, Jesus, God, or the world? **(SUPPLEMENT)**
6. With whom would you like to discuss the concepts in this book? Can you think of others who would enjoy reading it? How can you start a conversation with them about *Imaginary Jesus*?
7. If you could ask the author one question, what would it be?



# Imaginary Jesus: Matt Mikalatos

## DISCUSSION SUPPLEMENTS

### CHAPTER 0–2

#### Question 3

#### MATT WASHES HIS MOUTH OUT WITH SOAP

The absurd thing on the topic of “offensive language” in this book is that I never curse. You know how some people will curse, but only when they hit their thumb with a hammer? I usually say something like NNNGH! instead. In this book, I worked hard to use all these words appropriately.

There are different classes of “bad” words, and for some reason we get all bent out of shape about the wrong ones.

First we have vulgarities—the word vulgar comes from Latin and refers to the common people. Vulgarities are words that the “lower classes” would use; it’s class warfare stuff. Most “four-letter words” are vulgarities—impolite, common, and offensive only because cultured people don’t talk that way.

Then we have profanities. To profane something is to take a holy thing and use it as a common object—to pervert it in some way. This should be by far the more serious misuse of language. Texting OMG should be more offensive than a four-letter word, if you think about it. Invoking God because “tim iz rly going to the movie with Julie” is worse than being crass, if you ask me.

And then there’s cursing, which is what Pete does at the end of chapter zero. When he says damn he is using the word in its proper, biblical sense. My false Jesus should, in fact, be destroyed in hell if at all possible. (See what Paul says in Galatians 1:8–9 for an example of this kind of thing.)

—MM

### CHAPTER 0–2

#### Question 5

#### TAKE A SHOT EVERY TIME MATT POINTS OUT THAT HE DOESN’T DRINK

If anyone gets mad at me for the alcohol in this story, I might die from the irony. I lived in a coed dorm in college, and since I don’t drink, I spent Friday nights walking the hall and cleaning up after my drunken friends. I mopped up vomit, I carried unconscious girls back to their rooms and locked them safely inside, and I earned the nickname of “Floor Mom.” Also, there was this one guy who could still school me in Super Mario Brothers even when he was drunk. He would say, “I’m drunk right now and I’m beating you. Pathetic.”

Honestly, most people who aren’t still caught up in trying to bring back Prohibition will admit that the Last Supper involved actual wine. Not to say that it must be wine. For instance, one time I was in Asia and a friend of ours couldn’t drink wine at all because of his past history with alcohol. We hit the streets to find some grape juice, but with our limited language skills and the reality of that culture we could only find blueberry juice and grape punch. This left us wondering which was the most respectful liquid to use for our time of Communion. . . .

—MM



# Imaginary Jesus: Matt Mikalatos

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED

### CHAPTER 3–6

#### Question 1

#### IMAGINE THAT JOHN LENNON HAD NOT COMPLETELY CO-OPTED THE WORD IMAGINE

A vivid imagination can cause terror as well as entertainment. I remember as a child being absolutely certain that the floor around my bed had turned into an ocean and that (of course) sharks were circling. And I had to go to the bathroom so badly.

I've met plenty of people who are afraid of their imagination. They are concerned that their imagination will take them to unpleasant or unhealthy places. And certainly that is a danger. In fact, in *Imaginary Jesus* we see that my own crazy imagination has brought to life some dangerous characters. On the other hand, my imagination also brought this book to life, which from my point of view is a positive thing.

The most baffling thing is when Christians are against the imagination. It seems to me that they would be the most apt to embrace this wonderful “what-if” mechanism God provided us. And if Jesus truly died on the cross to redeem human beings, then not only our bodies, not only our spirits, but also our imaginations can be redeemed. There is no reason not to use it to explore our relationship with God, just like John Bunyan, C. S. Lewis, G. K. Chesterton, and many others have done.

—MM

### CHAPTER 7–11

#### Question 2

#### MORE IMAGINARY JESUSES THAN YOU CAN SHAKE A STICK AT

I was talking with a friend once about Jesus and she said that since he had never sinned, he was clearly a vegetarian. I pointed out that the Bible says he ate fish, at least, and she snapped, “Then he was a murderer.”

Pretty much every misconception of Jesus in this book comes from my own experience. I spent a long time with Legalist Jesus in my life; in fact, it wasn't until college that he was smashed to bits only to be replaced by a Jesus who could care less whether I ever sinned (maybe we would call him Libertine Jesus). In high school my Imaginary Jesus spent a ridiculous amount of time obsessing over whether I was dating the right girl or not.

I had to cut a lot of imaginary Jesuses out of this book simply because the sheer number of my own misconceptions about Jesus started to overwhelm the story. In a strange way, this is encouraging, because as we identify imaginary Jesuses in our lives we are moving toward understanding who the real Jesus is. In other words, when I finally come to the realization that Jesus' number one concern about my life is not whether I am listening to hard rock or easy-listening contemporary Christian on the radio, I am taking a step toward getting to know the real Jesus.

In 1 John 3:2 we read that when Jesus appears we will become like him, because we will see him as he really is. This tells us that everyone who claims to follow Jesus—from the apostle John all the way down through the centuries to you and me—has had misunderstandings about who Jesus is. Anyone who tells you that they know every little thing about who Jesus is and what he would do in every situation is either deceived or selling something. At the same time we know that everyone who is hoping for the day when Jesus comes back will be working to make themselves and the world around them as ready as possible so that when he comes they'll be as pure as they can get without being in his physical presence.

—MM



# Imaginary Jesus: Matt Mikalatos

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED

### CHAPTER 7–11

#### Question 5

#### THY TRANSLATION CAUSETH A SORE PATE

As it happens, I'm a fan of the King James translation. It has beautiful language in it, much like other great works of Elizabethan English, like Shakespeare's plays.

Unlike Shakespeare's plays, however, the Bible is not solely a work of art. The whole point of translating something is to make it accessible to an audience that speaks another language. Like it or not, Elizabethan English requires translation for most modern audiences. There are a lot of words that have shifted meanings subtly or completely in the last four hundred years.

All of that to say, my personal belief is that it's best to read multiple translations of the Bible so you don't get misconceptions about meaning based on translations. Or we could take the advice of my Muslim friend Imraan, who said, "If you Christians are so certain the Bible is the Word of God, shouldn't you just learn Greek and Hebrew?"

—MM

### CHAPTER 12–16

#### Question 9

#### THE TRUTH ABOUT MATTS AND DOGS

When my good friend Tifah finished reading an early draft of *Imaginary Jesus*, she called me and demanded to know, "Is it true?" Pretty much everyone who has read the book has asked me about various events and characters in the book, wanting to know if this or that thing was true.

And the answer, of course, is that yes, despite the tagline on the cover of the book saying it's a not-quite-true story, this entire book is true.

That's not to say that it's all true in the same way. For instance, the guitar/weeping/Motorcycle Guy story is an unexaggerated, unaltered, unvarnished account of something that actually happened. I did not, on the other hand, get transported to the first century where I interacted with a talking donkey.

So in what sense is it true when I write several chapters about walking around in first-century Judea? In the sense that these are real lessons I've learned, insights that have been given to me, questions I've asked and pondered as I've looked at the stories of Jesus (primarily in reading the book of Luke).

Sometimes I had to alter things a bit here and there to make the story flow better. An example of this would be that Sandy isn't the one who introduced me to the PSU atheist club; that was actually my friend Shasta Kramer. But it was confusing (and thus seemed less true to readers) to introduce a new character at that point in the book. You might notice that I never mention my job in the book (though I assure you that I have one). I never do dishes or hang out with my family, though I do those things often in real life. That's because the book is a selective slice of my life, designed to best reflect the truth of my journey to wrestle through very specific issues I've had with Jesus.

My friend Robert Darden told me once that truly good satire has to be both true and funny. It can't be one or the other; it has to be both. I worked hard to make sure that I never sacrificed truth for the sake of joke in this book. And if it is absolutely killing you that you don't know if this or that event in the book really happened, just drop me an e-mail or invite me out to your book club or something. I would love to tell you more stories, if you'll tell me some of your stories too.

—MM

P.S. Houdini Dog is real. But he's not the breed of dog revealed in the final chapter. (I actually hadn't discovered his identity yet when I wrote that chapter.)



# Imaginary Jesus: Matt Mikalatos

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED

### CHAPTER 17–20

#### Question 1

#### GUITAR GOD!

Some people have asked, “Why would God bother to answer the prayer of a sobbing kid walking through a neighborhood at night by providing an out-of-tune guitar in the garbage right as he prayed for a guitar, and then follow that up with some guy who would play it for him?”

Answer: I just don’t know.

Also, you might think that if God were to do something like, for instance, give a guy a guitar when he prayed for it, that the guy would then have the decency to learn to play guitar.

But he never did.

THE END

—MM

### CHAPTER 21–24

#### Question 5

#### LAUREL AND HARDY MEET THE AUTHOR

Elders Laurel and Hardy are real. Those aren’t their real names, though. Not sure about their first names, as they would not reveal them to me.

Anyway, our conversations are nearly verbatim (though edited of course—we talked about a lot more than what is in the book). They were good guys and I enjoyed our conversations. I have to say I prefer them to the replacement guys in our neighborhood right now.

Gents, if you ever see this book, I sincerely hope that your journey to find the true Christ will be richly rewarded. Drop by and see me sometime (you know where I live).

—MM

### CHAPTER 25–29

#### Question 8

#### A PARABLE ABOUT PARABLES

Once upon a time a certain man approached a certain author of a certain book and said, “I don’t understand the parable you have written concerning the three cars.”

The author looked at the man wisely and said, “The three cars are three concepts of Jesus. The car made of stone is completely erroneous, merely approximating the look of Jesus. The car made of wood looks far more like Jesus and even functions somewhat like him, but it is also a poor approximation. And a real car is like the real Jesus. The point is this: a man who owns a wooden car cannot judge a man with a stone car, for both are insufficient for driving to the market. That is why I write in parables, so that you will be ever seeing but never understanding.”

The man thought about this and then said, “Another possibility is that you are a lousy writer, which is why no one knows what in the world you are talking about.”

“Touché,” the author replied.

—MM



# Imaginary Jesus: Matt Mikalatos

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED

### CHAPTER 30–33

#### Question 1

#### YOUR OWN CULTURAL JESUS

A little cultural difference goes a long way toward creating misunderstandings. For instance, when Krista and I were married she had a habit of saying things like, “We need to take the garbage out soon.” Which to me translated as, “Either she or I need to eventually take out the trash,” but which she meant to convey, “You. Take out the garbage now.” The difference had more to do with our cultural differences—what we had been taught, where we grew up, things like that—than with actual differences between us.

People’s ideas about Jesus (and many other people and things) are also heavily influenced by culture. My wife met someone in Asia, for instance, who had been taught that Jesus was a legendary, quasi-historical character like Robin Hood. This person looked at a world history time line and saw Jesus’ birthday on there and said, “Wait a minute . . . he was an actual person?”

In the 1950s in the USA Jesus was thought to be impassive, meaning he showed very little emotion. (You may have seen the picture of Jesus staring up into heaven serenely praying right before being brutally murdered.) In the 1970s, Jesus was the Love Man, the revolutionist who came to set us all free in a variety of ways. And today our perceptions of Jesus reflect our cultural values in other ways.

I think that if we’re ever going to see the real Jesus, we need to talk to people from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and religious beliefs and compare what they say to what we know and can discover about him—so that we can see our own cultural biases and remove those cultural lenses when we look at the real Jesus. This will enable us to better see him for who he really is.

—MM

### CHAPTER 34–39

#### Question 8

#### FAMILY MATTERS

Of all the people in the book, I suppose Krista could be pitied the most. Not only do I do things like invite the president over to dinner (not that he’s ever actually come . . . although you are very welcome in our home, sir) but I also have the nerve to talk about personal things from our life: the miscarriage, the healing of her hands, that time when she put the grapes on her eyes, et cetera, et cetera.

You might be asking, “How does Krista feel about being paraded out for your book?” Well, as a matter of fact, she doesn’t mind. We talk about what things I’m allowed to discuss publicly. Our miscarriage is a good example. We talked about it and decided that if it helped someone else know they weren’t alone in dealing with their grief and loss, then it would be a good thing to share. Krista has a high value on being honest about her own experiences as well as helping people around her. We shared about the miscarriage on my blog when it happened, and with our friends and coworkers as well. In fact, the greatest disservice this book does to Krista is that she was by far one of the most pivotal figures in dealing with my own loss, grief, and theological questions—much more than is represented in this book. She is the most important person in my life.

And as for the children . . . well, they don’t even know they’re in the book. They are much too young to read something so offensive! Maybe when they’re in their thirties I will give them each a copy.

—MM





# Imaginary Jesus: Matt Mikalatos

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED

NOW THAT YOU'VE FINISHED THE BOOK

Question 5

### ALL MY HOPES AND DREAMS

My editors have asked me a couple of times about my hopes for this book. I think my hopes for this book are the same as any author's. I hope that the book grows up, gets a good education, maybe finds a nice girl, and settles down and starts writing books of its own.

Okay, seriously, here's what I really hope for this book: I hope that people will enjoy themselves while they're thinking about God. I hope that people will have big belly laughs while they interact with their friends and people whose religious beliefs they strenuously disagree with, and that they can talk about it with good humor and enjoy themselves. I hope that someone gets stomach cramps from laughing and then decides that they want to give a copy to their friends and discuss together who they think Jesus is. I hope that someone will have their world shaken and they'll realize that Jesus isn't who they thought he was, and they'll grab their friends and go figure it out together.

And I sincerely hope that someone laughs so hard that they wet themselves. That would be a dream come true.

—MM



## NOTES

