

Welcome

Blue Beetle opened this weekend to a box office of XXXXXXXX. It's considered a decent opening for a small superhero movie. Which is bananas. Earlier this summer, *The Flash* bombed with \$150 million. Even "bad" super-hero movies are making hundreds of millions of dollars.

Why do we love Superheros so much? A number of comic lovers - writers, artists, scholars - have taken to talking about superheros as modern mythology. That's right - Iron Man and Captain America are latter day Athene and Apollo. Superman and Batman are contemporary incarnations of Zeus and Hades.

If you think that sounds silly, I get it. But I think that's because we misunderstand the power of mythology. We most often think of myth as stories made up by primitive people who didn't understand science. It's raining and we don't understand the water cycle or low pressure systems, so it must be that Zeus is sad.

But just because ancient peoples didn't understand the scientific method didn't mean they were idiots. The ancient Greeks figured out the earth was round, and some of us still haven't managed that.

The point is that myths are far more than just pre-scientific explanations for how the world worked. Myths are framing stories. They tell us who we are, what the world is like and what our relationship to each other is.

Take the first and greatest superhero - Superman.

[<video interview on Superman>](#)

Now think about the superheros in the box office: the Flash. Batman. All the Marvel heroes, from Captain America to Iron Man to Spider-Man to the Marvels. Blue Beetle as of this weekend.

They're a billion-dollar industry (especially when you count movies, TV, comics, toys, etc).

And that should bother us because in the Superhero movies, nothing ever really changes. That's on purpose - the creators want you to come back and buy next month's issue, or go see the next movie coming out in a few months.

But when the stories that shape who we are don't transform us, when they keep us trapped in the way things are, when they uphold the status quo, maybe we need to demand better.

Friends, today I want to look at how the superhero stories we love fall short of the revolutionary, radical life God calls us to.

Don't worry - I'm not going to tell you to quit watching Marvel movies. I *am* going to show you a story that's way more exciting, especially because we get to be part of it!

Message

This summer, we're putting *your* questions front and center. All spring, we collected your questions and we got dozens. We've grouped them all together and are working through them together this summer.

A couple of principles are guiding our series:

Here at Catalyst, doubts and questions aren't enemies of faith; quite the opposite. We think it matters that Jesus asked way more questions than he gave answers.

Secondly, we're not trying to settle questions here. The goal of this series is to create conversation, not consensus. These messages are the beginning of conversations. Not the end. Our goal is to ask better questions together.

Let's look at the questions guiding us today. And I gotta be honest... since this is the final week of the series, I might have indulged myself a bit:

Can you answer whether or not some of the statements in the Dark Knight are true or scriptural. Especially hitting on the ending scene in the movie. "You either die a hero or live long enough to see yourself, become the villain" and "Sometimes the truth isn't good enough. Sometimes people deserve more, sometimes people deserve to have their faith rewarded."

I'm going to cheat a little bit today and broaden the scope. *The Dark Knight* is one of my favorite movies of all time, and maybe still my favorite superhero movie (the *Spider-Verse* movies are undeniable!). But we're going to talk about my big problem with superhero movies.

Here it is:

(are you ready?)

Nothing ever changes.

That's largely true from film to film - whether we're talking about Tony Stark's raging ego or Bruce Wayne being sad about his parents or Star Lord's shoot-first-ask-questions-never attitude, these characters show growth in individual films but often revert back to their original characterizations by the open of the next.

But I mean more broadly, too. Superhero movies uphold the status quo while giving the illusion of fighting for justice. It's why the Pentagon has a partnership with Marvel movies - the US military sees Superhero movies as big budget recruiting videos, making us believe we're the good guys, the enemies are all out there, and that if we just punch them enough times, we'll accomplish justice.

But then the next movie starts and there's another big bad out there who needs to be punched to death.

At no point is the nature of power ever really questioned (the closest we got was Civil War, when the problem was just that the government wasn't in control enough).

Mainstream superhero stories don't fundamentally challenge the status quo. They don't interrogate assumptions our culture makes about power, about what counts as righteous, about good and evil.

For those of us who follow Jesus, this should be a huge caution flag, warning us to slow down and take some care with these stories.

Turn with us to [Romans 12](#).

Romans is a letter written by the Apostle Paul to a church in the capital of the Roman empire. Paul wrote this letter to introduce himself to the church in anticipation of an upcoming visit.

The whole letter deals with a host of issues the church found itself facing as it navigated life with Jesus - we've explored some of them already in this series. As Paul moves toward the end of the letter, he's exploring what it means for this church to live faithfully in *Rome*. After all, they're in the very heart of the Empire, the one that crucified Jesus.

The Pax Romana is very different from the Way of Jesus. But Paul understood that living out that difference could be challenging. In chapter 12, he offers this encouragement:

And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him. Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect. -- Romans 12:1–2 (NLT)

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What Paul's calling for here is radical transformation. Christians should *not* be living the status quo. Not because we're contrarian by nature, but because the ways of the world around us bring death, not life. Because we're learning to see the world as Jesus sees it. We're learning to

see others not as us vs. them, but as beloved children who are also made in God's image. And we're learning to see ourselves not as citizens of a latter-day military superpower, but as citizens of a king who dies for his enemies rather than killing them.

That's actually one of the reasons we sing when we gather. Songs shape us. They stick to our guts, remain in our brains long after sermons fade. So let's pause and celebrate the God who created us and calls us to follow him!

Song

What does living this counter-empire life look like in practice? There's a sense in which we're fortunate that America and Rome are so similar, particularly in how both nations build empires on the world stage.

While those ancient Christians living in Rome are two thousand years and a whole raft of cultural differences separated from us in the modern West, Paul's specific advice to them on what it looks like to be transformed into a new person are surprisingly relevant. Let's keep reading, taking time to note what Paul's radical, revolutionary life looks like:

In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out with as much faith as God has given you. If your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly.

It doesn't matter whether you live in a world of Caesars or celebrities, the Empire wants us to forget how important we are. Spend our time (and our money!) keeping up with the Kardashians.

I love that the first revolutionary thing Paul tells us to do is be ourselves. Know who God made you to be. Know how God has gifted you. And then *be that person*. Don't rob the rest of us of the beautiful, unique, important person God made you to be.

He goes on:

Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other. Never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically. Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble, and keep on praying. When God's people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality.

This is such a beautiful description of what a faith community can be. Pursue deep, genuine love for each other, work hard, be patient and hospitable. Wow. Again, hard to imagine something more counter-cultural than this, isn't it?

Then Paul turns from those within our community, the 'us' to the outsiders. 'Them'.

Bless those who persecute you. Don't curse them; pray that God will bless them. Be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with each other. Don't be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people. And don't think you know it all!

Never pay back evil with more evil. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable. Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone.

Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say, "I will take revenge; I will pay them back," says the LORD. Instead, "If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals of shame on their heads."

Can you imagine that? A people who doesn't think about revenge, but responds to cruelty with kindness? A community who blesses those who persecute us

Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good. — [Romans 12:6-21](#)

Isn't it fascinating how differently Paul defines losing? For Paul, losing isn't falling down because someone else could punch harder. That's how Rome (and America) define losing.

No, for Paul, 'losing' looks like acting like the Empire instead of like Jesus.

Can you imagine a Marvel movie where the Avengers were all really kind to Thanos, and their kindness changed his mind about having to kill half the universe?

No... that's not what our blockbusters run on. We want fist fights and giant sky lasers and big third act battle scenes.

And there's nothing wrong with a little escapist entertainment.

But I'm afraid, friends, that we let these stories shape our imaginations, limit us to a world of might makes right.

The story God created us to live is so much better than that one. And it takes real courage to follow Jesus, to live out that story with him. Will you join him?

Communion + Examen

Jesus makes peace through his own sacrifice!

When in the last week has my life looked more like Jesus than the world around me?

When in the last week has my life looked more like the world around me than like Jesus?

When in the next week might my life look more like the world around me than like Jesus?

How can I make space for God to transform me by changing how I see myself, my neighbors and my world?

Assignment + Blessing

IN CASE THERE'S NO INTERVIEW: He was created by Jerry Sigel and Joel Schuster, two Jewish teenagers, in the 1930s (not a great time to be Jewish, if you remember your history). Superman had powers far beyond an ordinary human - he was faster than a speeding bullet. He was more powerful than a locomotive. And he could leap tall buildings in a single bound!

But what was most amazing about Superman was how *he always did the right thing*. His great power never made him a bully.