

For the last 18 years or so, Taylor Swift has been one of the most dominant singers and songwriters in America and much of the world. In the last 5-7 years (maybe more?), she has maybe been *the* most dominant, and she completely owned 2023. And I'm not standing here as some biased 20-year Swiftie fanatic or something like that. I could count on one hand the number of songs I knew for sure were hers up until a few weeks ago. And then on December 6th, she was named Time Magazine's 2023 Person of The Year. At that point I was still debating about the sermon for today; she was in the mix with a few others. But the honor from Time made the decision easy. So today we look at what Jesus might say to Taylor Swift.¹



Now, you Swifties especially should know that in addition to the hours of writing and editing the sermon, I spent at *least* 30 hours the last 2 weeks immersing myself in all things Taylor Swift – The Reputation and Eras concert tour videos; the biographical movie, *Miss Americana*; I studied tons of lyrics; I watched her NYU Commencement speech for the class of 2022, and read countless articles. And of course: I listened to nearly all her albums – including a couple country albums! – in addition to Taylor Swift playlists and watched several of her song videos. Because of this deep dive into her life, depending on which of my kids you ask, they're either stoked, or *deeply* concerned, that dad might be turning into a Swiftie ☺. My reputation is taking a serious hit with some people in my family, which only means I'm getting a little taste of Taylor's life, right? So, let me put all that to good use, and share the tip of the iceberg about Taylor Swift with those of you who are clueless about her.

Taylor Alison Swift was born on December 13th, 1989 in West Reading, PA. Her parents are Scott and Andrea, and she has a younger brother, Austin. While Taylor's story would not be described as "rags to riches," her family wasn't



“wealthy.” She got into musical theater for a while, but eventually gravitated toward country music. **By age 11 she had already determined that in order to achieve her dreams she was going to have to move to Nashville.** When she was 14, that’s exactly what her family did, as her dad, who worked for Merrill Lynch, was able to get a job transfer to the suburb of Hendersonville. That parental support for her exists to this day, which is part of the charm about Taylor. Also, at age 14 she signed her first contract with a division of Sony publishing, becoming the youngest artist they’d ever signed. That theme of “youngest ever” and “first ever” to accomplish things is a frequent adjective in her professional career.

Her first four albums were country and country pop. Right out the gate, she won awards and accolades. **Then, her second album won the 2010 *Album of the Year* Grammy. She was the youngest recipient ever of the award.** Since then, she’s won *Album of the Year* two more times. She’s the first solo artist to win *Album of the Year* three times, and may win it again in a few weeks, along with 5 other Grammys she’s nominated for.

She started leaning more heavily into pop music with her 5th studio album, though her albums since then span different styles. But since that 5th album released, she’s been on a meteoric rise to the top of the music industry. **No musical artist/band except her has had more than two albums sell a million copies or more in the first week of an album’s release: she’s done it five times.** She’s won 12 total Grammys and countless awards from other organizations. Her 10th studio album was released in 2022 and set a record by occupying the top 10 songs on the Billboard Hot 100, *all at the same time*. Her net worth is now estimated at \$1.1 billion, becoming the first person to achieve billionaire status primarily through income as a recording and performing artist.

Her impact reaches far beyond the music industry. At every concert stop for her current world tour, she impacts the host city’s local economy at the same level as the Super Bowl; the U.S. Federal Reserve calls this economic boost “the Taylor Effect.” No less than 10 universities – including Stanford and Harvard – offer classes on her, whether it’s her lyrics, legacy, or cultural impact. She has started the Taylor Swift Foundation, she works to help girls

get into the music industry, she donates significant amounts of money to local food banks in every concert city, and has made financial contributions to fight cancer. She is known for taking good care of the musicians, dancers, and others who make her concerts possible.

Lastly, what's had her in the headlines and on tv a lot recently is her connection to the NFL. She started dating **(Photo)** the Kansas City Chief's Travis Kelce this past fall, and as a result, Taylor Swift has made the most popular sport in America *more* popular: viewership and social media engagement are up. If she and Travis get engaged, I'd be interested in officiating the wedding – maybe you Swifties can help me send them some friendship bracelets to let them know I'm interested and available.



All this success, and a whole lot more I've had to leave out: And she's only 34. **She's already on par with the Beatles, Michael Jackson, Elvis Presley, and whoever else you want to name. Before she hangs up the microphone and guitar, I think she will probably have passed them all.** And: she has accomplished all of this without things that frequently plague other artists (I sincerely pray this continues for her, and we will pray for her at the end of the sermon today): no drugs, no alcohol abuse, no rehab stints, no arrests, not even over-sexualized lyrics or outfits that are so prevalent in pop music. She does have some songs that are labeled explicit for the use of particular words, and that trend has unfortunately increased over time. Clean versions of her albums are all online, if you care to listen. For a quick sampling, however, watch this video, put together by Bree, our Youth Director, who is a certified Swiftie...**(Video)**

Did you notice the stage in the Eras tour promo video at the start? It's incredible. Basically, a ginormous custom-shaped TV screen with trapdoors and risers that move up and down...A few of us in my family watched that three-hour concert video, and part way through, our 6-year old spontaneously piped up, "That stage is better than the one at church!" 😊

Anyway, most all of her lyrics are based on her relationships with people – usually guys she’s dated. Love songs and breakup songs are throughout her musical catalog. **She clearly has a desire to love and be loved, long term; To be the “end game” for someone as she sings in “End Game.” In “Paper Rings” she sings, “I like shiny things, but I’d marry you with paper rings.”** On one hand, she’s a total romantic. But then there are the songs that focus on break-ups, with emotional lyrical responses vacillating between anger/revenge and sad/broken-hearted. She is somehow able to share all of this in a way that is poetic and invites the listener in, to identify with her story and make it their own...with catchy and memorable melodies and of course: a sick beat.

One last thing that you need to know that is crucial to the rest of this message: Taylor Swift is a self-proclaimed Christian. She comes straight out and says so on camera in *Miss Americana*, her 2020 biographical movie. In *Soon You’ll Get Better*, a tender song from 2019 about her mom’s fight with cancer, she sings, “so now I pray to Jesus too.” In a Christmas song from 2007 she sings, “So here’s to Jesus Christ who saved our lives.” Unless there’s been a change of heart that she hasn’t publicly shared: Jesus *is* her savior. Many Christians might question some of her life choices, language in some of her lyrics, and political stances, in light of her Christian faith. I would call her a “progressive” Christian. But she has publicly said and sung that she trusts Jesus, and that needs to be respected.

Given that there is so much in her life that causes stress, worry, and obsession over getting things “just right” – her music, relationships, moving past the hurts she’s experienced, the intense scrutiny of her life, the paparazzi, the highs and lows with romantic relationships, the success that’s taken her to dizzying heights...Given all that: **I imagine it would be difficult for her to trust Jesus in the midst of this and find her identity in Him.** I don’t mean that in a judgmental way; I’d struggle with it too, for sure. I’m just going off of observations of people in general and what she’s publicly revealed about herself, which is undoubtedly incomplete. But the fact is, it’s not just Taylor Swift who might struggle with that. **Struggling to keep Jesus as Lord of our lives and finding our identity in Him is something a lot of us Christians struggle with.** Any of us could say, “Hi,

I'm the problem, it's me." The question is: do we have the courage to do so when it comes to our journey with Jesus?

Lots in life seeks to be lord and pull us from Jesus: Grief, pain, and heartache at one end, and money, power, greed, pride, selfishness at the other. Perhaps the most *seductive* is "success" - and Taylor's had a truckload of that. **But Jesus invites us to call him Lord, and really let him *be* lord, and to build our lives on him – to find our identity in him.** That is Jesus' invitation at the end of the Sermon on The Mount, in the passage we read earlier, and elsewhere, too. Probably 95% of the Sermon on the Mount is moral and ethical stuff that even non-Christians will support: treat others well, don't murder, don't say one thing and do something else, be maritally faithful, do not worry, don't be judgmental, and so forth.

But then Jesus closes it out with a couple very Jesus-centric statements that a lot of people brush off and ignore if they *aren't* Christians, and is even a challenge for those of us who *are*. **First, he gives the invitation to truly keep Jesus as Lord of our lives (Matthew 7:21).** Just *saying* he's Lord isn't enough. It needs to show, in our values and how we live our lives...by doing the will of our heavenly father, as he puts it in the last part of this verse. So: Do our lives visibly and actively demonstrate that Jesus is Lord? Would someone know that you and I are Christians if they observed us for a while, or conversed with us, or worked at the office with us, or were neighbors with us? Would the Lordship of Jesus be evident because we live/act/talk/care differently than the world?

And then Jesus paints a metaphorical picture to illustrate this. He crafts a story, which is one of Taylor's great gifts, right? **So, second, Jesus crafts a story where the invitation is to live into "Jesus is Lord" by building our life on Jesus and his word.** He's inviting us to be grounded in him, or rooted in him we could say. I think the language of "identity" fits well: he wants our identity to be built on him; not on ourselves or our successes or our relationships with other people.

So, what happens when he's not really Lord, and when our identity *isn't* rooted in him, is two-fold (at least). **First (and this is true of anyone**

regardless of faith in Jesus), when the boyfriend or girlfriend or spouse leaves (death or divorce), or the job disappears, or the bank account gets drained, or the body breaks down and you can't do what you used to do (sing, dance, play hoops, etc.) – now your identity is gone if that's where you got it from. Who *are* you without these things if *that's* where your identity is? Now look: we've probably all experienced that, and probably Taylor Swift has, too; so no criticism if you have. The difference between us and her is that our sad experiences of identities built on poor foundations don't end up in songs or the headlines like hers do...but the impact of a shattered identity *is* universal.

Second (and this is specific to Jesus-followers), when something besides Jesus is our identity, we end up compartmentalizing Jesus to certain segments of our lives – like Sunday mornings – and oftentimes one result is that no one besides other Christians know we follow Jesus. While some Swifties do know this about her: my daughters, who are both pretty big Taylor Swift fans though there are bigger fans even here this morning...both of them (I think; 1 for sure) and some other Taylor fans I talked to this week about the sermon: they didn't know Taylor Swift is a Christian until I mentioned it. So, perhaps her faith is compartmentalized and minimized because something else is lord of her life and the foundation of her life, so that her identity is found in something besides Jesus: her relationships, success, song-writing, and singing are all possibilities, and probably more. And I think any of us would be susceptible in her shoes, including myself, because I suspect a lot of us are susceptible to this with the more normal lives that we all lead.

So, what might Jesus say to her? Well, I'd love to tell you that I think Jesus would tell Taylor to bring her mega-stardom to writing worship songs and come be a part of music leadership here at Rose Hill ☺. But, I don't think that's what Jesus would say at all, because we need Christians in secular music, just like we need Christian software engineers at Microsoft, and Christians in our public schools, and in construction, the medical field, at Starbucks, and so forth. **No one thinks Christians should work in just the “Christian version” of other spheres of work and industry – why would Jesus tell Taylor to abandon secular music?** That's the “dark place” God

has put her to shine the light of Jesus, just as God has put each of us in places to shine the light of Christ. We need Christians genuinely living with Jesus as Lord, with their identity rooted in him, so they stand out from the world and shine the light in the darkness - in our places of work, our neighborhoods, and the places where we socialize and recreate.

So, let me share with you what I think Jesus *might* say to Taylor, in two versions today. The first version is comprised largely of her own lyrics, though I've altered some a bit because the context today isn't about a romantic relationship, but a relationship with Jesus who loves her all the way to the cross. And then the second version of what Jesus might say is more condensed without the Swiftian lyrical poetry.

Dear Ms. Swift: I have blessed you with an incredible musical gift that you have worked tirelessly to maximize. You have brought people comfort, joy, and created community. I've also seen you persevere through many storms in life: heartache, scrutiny, public humiliation, huge expectations and your own self-proclaimed pathological people-pleasing. I remember it all too well.
You'll weather those storms better if you make me Lord – not just savior – and build your life and identity on me.

So, I invite you to make me your first priority. Trust me more. After all, I've got a big reputation for a reason: because I rose up from the dead. I resurrect lives all the time. I got a list of names, and yours is in red, underlined, because of my love for you.

On your heart, you've got a blank space,
 And you can write *my* name more clearly and concretely.
 I know you want to be defined by the things that you love;
 You know that you are what you love.

So, trust me more and find your true love story.

Let me be the King of your heart.

Don't let your faith in me fade.

If you could see that I'm the one,

Who understands you,

Who's been here all along:

Can't you see? It's not Karma you need: You belong with me. And all's well that ends well, when you trust in me as Lord: it's gonna be forever. So, fearlessly make me Lord of your life, the foundation for who you are and your identity, both now and evermore.

Ok. That is truly one for Taylor and the Swifties in the house. Here's the shortened version that might be a bit clearer, and that I think he might say to any of us: **I gave you an incredible gift (or more than one) that you have worked tirelessly to maximize (I hope you have). You have brought people comfort and joy and created community (I hope so). I've also seen you persevere through many storms in life: heartache, disappointments, grief, pain, and loss. And you'll weather those storms better if you make me Lord – not just savior – and build your identity on me. So, fearlessly make me Lord of your life, the foundation for who you are and your identity, both now and evermore.**

The stuff we've built our identities on apart from Jesus might not lead to fame, fortune, and the paparazzi...and the difficulties in life that our false foundations have caused might be different than Taylor's, as well (or maybe similar). But every one of us could call Jesus "Lord" and then live with something else as our identity-shaping foundation. We all have that capability. But with Jesus as the foundation and our identity in him, we can withstand the storms of life – whether brought by grief and heartache or temptation and pride – because **Jesus will never leave us nor forsake us**. He won't ditch us, betray us, cheat on us, or walk out on us; He's faithful and built to last. He's our A-team, our first team, and our ultimate end game...and He's the only one we need as Lord of our lives, the foundation on which we are built, with our identity completely rooted in him. Let's pray...Amen.

¹ Pretty much everything in here about Taylor is quite available online. The Time Magazine interview with her for her Person of the Year award was a major source, as well as the Wikipedia page on her, Billboard chart history at their website, and other sources of information, too.