



Queen of Country Leaves the World a Better Place

The Wired Word **for the Week of September 6, 2026**

In the News

Country singer songwriter icon Dolly Parton died on August 25 following a brief battle with cancer. She was 80. Her husband of nearly 60 years, Carl Dean, died in March of 2025.

"Dolly has lived in the light and is in the arms of Jesus," her nephew, Bryan Seaver, said in a statement from the family. "Her unmatched generosity reached the lives of countless people whom she would never meet. ... Dolly's unconditional love for all people was the guiding force for her lasting impact."

Many have noted the near universal appeal of the best-selling female country music artist of all time, beloved by religious and nonreligious people of all ages, races and political ideologies. She's been called everything from a "Jezebel" to a prophet or a "secular country-pop saint" and the "Jesus of Appalachia." In 2011, photographer Alice Hawkins created a project titled, "Dolly Parton is my religion." Some preachers have made her the subject of sermons, under the heading, "The Gospel According to Dolly."

But in 2020, Dolly wrote, "I'm not that religious, but I'm very, very spiritual." And in 2021 she said, "I don't want to be worshiped, because there's a scripture in my Bible that talks about idol worship."

When someone asked her how she practiced her faith, Dolly said, "I don't practice it. I live it." And she lived it in her own way, supporting LGBTQ+ rights and the Black Lives Matter movement as an outgrowth of her understanding of what God desires from us. She also believed a person did not have to ascribe to Christian theology "to be a decent and worthwhile human being."

"We are all God's children," she told Larry King in 2016. "I just love and accept people where they are for who they are," she said in an *Associated Press* interview. "I try to love everybody."

Born in 1946, the fourth of 12th children, Dolly grew up in a one-room cabin without running water or electricity in the Smoky Mountains of East Tennessee. She was raised in a Pentecostal church where her grandfather "preached hell so hot that you could feel the heat." She was so frightened that she went to the altar repeatedly to avoid that fate. "I must've got saved 15 times," she said.

At around 12 years of age, Dolly started visiting an abandoned church where people went to drink and have sex. She would read the Bible verses and look at off-color graffiti on the walls and somehow feel "the presence" and peace of God. Later she said that she found God and herself there.

The next year, she debuted at the Grand Ole Opry. In her seven-decade career, Dolly wrote more than 1,000 songs, sold more than 100 million records, produced 49 top-10 country albums, won 11 Grammys, with 55 nominations, starred in the hit movies, *9 to 5* and *Steel Magnolias*, and created a business empire worth approximately \$650 million. Her hits included "I Will Always Love You," "9 to 5," "Family," "Islands in the Stream," "Jolene" and "God Only Knows." A recipient of the Recording Academy's lifetime achievement award, Dolly was inducted into three halls

of fame (the Country Music HOF, the Gospel Music Association's Gospel HOF and the Rock & Roll HOF).

[Russell Moore](#) wrote that Dolly exhibited a kind of self-respect that Joan Didion described as "a certain toughness, a kind of moral nerve; ... character ... the willingness to accept responsibility for one's own life."

A prodigious [philanthropist](#), Dolly contributed to causes near and dear to her heart: childhood literacy through her Imagination Library, which has gifted more than 300 million books to children around the world; educational grants and scholarships for Dollywood employees and local students enrolled in the Dollywood Foundation's Buddy Program that incentivized at-risk children to finish high school; health care, which helped develop Moderna's Covid-19 vaccine and supported pediatric and women's medical units; hunger relief; emergency and long-term natural disaster relief for victims of wildfires, flooding and Hurricane Helene; and the opening of Dollywood, a theme park in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, to provide employment, skills training and affordable entertainment for more than three million local residents and visitors every year.

When asked what she thought people saw in her, Dolly responded, "I really like to think it's God spark."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Dolly Parton's Faith Was Hard to Measure. *The Christian Century*](#)

[In Dolly Parton's Theology, God and Acceptance Shared the Same Stage. *AP News*](#)

[Dolly Parton Never Hid Her Faith and Never Used It Against Anyone. That's Why Everybody Loved Her. *Relevant*](#)

['I Am a Person of Faith': How Christianity Shaped Dolly Parton's Music and Spirit. Religion News Service](#)

[Remembering Dolly Parton, Whose Artistry and Generosity Touched Generations. PBS NewsHour](#)

Applying the News Story

Use the news to consider how to build good character and do good deeds that honor God and bless others.

The Big Questions

1. What's a Dolly Parton song that is meaningful to you? What impact, if any, has she had on your life?
2. Why do you think so many people felt a sense of kinship with Dolly? What was it about her that drew people together in spite of radically different politics, theology, culture or ideology?
3. What does "The Gospel According to [Your Name]" sound like?
4. What would it take for people to give you the nickname, "The Jesus of [Your Town]"?
5. What can churches and communities learn from Dolly?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Genesis 37:3-4, 23-24

Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children because he was the son of his old age, and he made him an ornamented [many-colored] robe. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peaceably to him. ... So when

Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the ornamented [many-colored] robe that he wore, and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. (For context, read [Genesis 37:1-36](#).)

When she was a child, Dolly watched her mother stitch rags together to make a coat for her to wear to school. As she sewed, her mother told her about the coat Joseph's father made for him, evidence of how much he was loved. Dolly says she wore her coat of rags proudly, feeling like a queen, because it reminded her of how much she was loved. She was confused and hurt when other children laughed at her unusual attire. But somehow she recognized that they were just as poor in material things, while she lived in a one-room shack rich with love. Later, Dolly wrote the hit song, "[Coat of Many Colors](#)", about that experience.

Of course, Joseph was stripped of his beautiful robe, and for years wore the rags of a slave and convict, before he was elevated to a position of power and clothed in royal garments in Pharaoh's administration and family. In that role, he could have had his revenge on his brothers for their cruelty and betrayal, but instead he forgave them and used his advantage to provide for their needs.

The prophet Isaiah rejoices in God, who he says "has clothed me with the garments of salvation ... [and] covered me with the robe of righteousness" ([Isaiah 61:10](#)). Jesus uses similar imagery in the parable of the prodigal son to describe how the father (who represents God the Father) treats his wayward son, dressing him in his best robe, ring of authority, and sandals for his feet ([Luke 15:22](#)).

Questions: How might the memory of the coat his father made for him have helped sustain Joseph in the frightening years of separation from him, slavery, false accusation and incarceration in Egypt? When have you felt God

clothing you with the garments of salvation and covering you with the robe of righteousness, when you were sure you didn't deserve to be treated that way? How did that impact you?

Acts 10:38

... how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. (For context, read [Acts 10:34-43](#).)

Jesus is our best example of what it means to do good in the world. He put his time and effort into healing *all* who were oppressed by the devil, including those who had no means to repay him for his kindness. He could have made a name for himself and made a fortune serving the rich and powerful, but offered healing to all comers. He taught his disciples to do good even to those who hated them, because that is how God treats even the ungrateful and the wicked ([Luke 6:27-36](#)).

Many biblical passages contain commendations of those who do good works and acts of charity ([Acts 9:36](#); [1 Timothy 5:10](#)) and commands that God's people are "to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share" ([Ephesians 4:28](#); [1 Thessalonians 5:15](#); [3 John 1:11](#); [Hebrews 13:16](#); [1 Timothy 6:17-19](#)). Paul says that we were "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we may walk in them" ([Ephesians 2:10](#)).

Dolly took that advice to heart. In a 2019 interview, she said that when she was very young, an elderly woman at church told her that God had a special purpose for her life. That prompted her to believe that she "was supposed to do something good." She began to feel "responsible to God ... to be doing something for God." She told *PBS NewsHour's* Amna Nawaz that she wanted to be "useful."

Since then, she said she prayed daily for God's guidance away from "all the wrong things, wrong people in my life," and toward "all the right things, right people, and to let me glorify Him and uplift mankind, to do something in this world to make it a little better than it was, and let me be a light and a vessel to be used." While we don't save ourselves or somehow earn our way to heaven, God's generous kindness shown to us in Jesus prompts us to express our joy and gratitude through doing good to the best of our ability, by the power of God's Spirit at work in us.

Questions: Why do you think people who call others "do-gooders" don't always mean the epithet as a compliment? Would it be better to be called "do-badders"? What good deeds are you prompted to do because of the grace and mercy God has shown to you?

John 8:12

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." (For context, read [John 8:12-19](#).)

Matthew 5:14-16

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." (For context, read [Matthew 5:13-16](#).)

Jesus brought physical light into a blind man's world by healing his eyes ([John 9:1-7](#)). He brought spiritual light into Saul's life by healing his spiritual blindness ([Acts 9:1-19](#)).

James Talarico, the Democratic candidate for the U.S. Senate from Texas and Presbyterian seminarian, commented, "Dolly Parton said, 'We are all pieces of God. All of us have that God light inside of us.' Jesus told us the

same thing. He said, 'I am the light of the world.' But he also said, 'You are the light of the world.' Me and you. Like any good teacher, Jesus is trying to get us to see the light inside ourselves. People like Dolly Parton show us how to shine that light."

Questions: How does spiritual blindness manifest itself in the life of an individual or group (a nation, a church or other organization)? Why can Jesus guarantee that anyone who follows him will have the light of life? Are Jesus' followers the light of the world in the same way that Jesus is the Light of the World? Explain. How are you shining your light before others so that they give glory to God?

Luke 5:29-32

Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house, and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others reclining at the table with them. The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick; I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." (For context, read [Luke 5:27-32](#).)

Jesus called Levi (aka Matthew), a tax collector, to follow him, and "he got up, left everything, and followed him" without hesitation (vv. 27-28). Then Levi threw a party for him, inviting his friends to sit at table with Jesus and his disciples. The Pharisees and scribes recoiled at this. In their minds, association with "tax collectors and sinners" only meant one thing: "Birds of a feather flock together" and "Sleep with pigs, wake up with mud." Nothing good could come of it.

But Jesus looked at people from the wrong side of the tracks differently: If they were hurting and he was called to be a healer, it made perfect sense that he should go to the sick and injured rather than to the healthy who

didn't need any help. If his critics called him "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" ([Luke 7:34](#); see context of [Luke 7:24-35](#)), then he would wear the moniker as a badge of honor.

Dolly Parton said she based her public persona on the local tramp she saw as a child, who she thought was beautiful. Where others saw trash, she saw treasure.

When the Pharisees and scribes grumbled about the way Jesus welcomed sinners ([Luke 15:1-2](#)), our Lord responded by describing how God in mercy seeks and saves lost sheep, lost coins and lost boys. And he warned those who looked down on others that "the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you" because they believed God's message John the Baptist proclaimed, while the religious leaders did not ([Matthew 21:28-32](#)).

Questions: Who might we be tempted to view as modern-day "tax collectors and sinners" who should not have a seat at God's table? Would you be comfortable if people started calling you "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners [and *fill in the blank*]"? If not, what might Jesus (and Dolly) say to you?

For Further Discussion

1. "On many occasions, when my dream seemed far away, my mama would tell me the story of [The Little Engine \[That Could\]](#) to comfort and encourage me," Dolly recalled. "While I listened to her, I would close my eyes and think of myself as the Little Engine and just start saying over and over again, 'I think I can. I think I can. I think I can.' It gave me strength, it gave me hope, and it gave me the courage to keep chasing my dreams."

Share with the group about a book or story that inspired you when you were a child.

2. Scan the poem, [The Fourth Sign of the Zodiac, Part 3, by Mary Oliver](#).

How might the verse reflect the way Dolly lived her life? What does it mean to "belong to the world"? What is it about the world that you admire? That you weep over? That musicians might compose music and poets might write poems about? How can you avoid wasting whatever time you are given to live in this world?

3. In her 2019 duet with Zach Williams, ["There Was Jesus,"](#) Dolly sang that whatever the circumstances of her life, Jesus was always there.

How have you known the presence of Jesus in different seasons of your life?

Responding to the News

1. In lieu of flowers, Dolly's family asked for donations to [Dolly Parton's Imagination Library](#).

2. A quick search on the internet will offer many [links](#) to sites, [songs](#), [podcasts](#), [videos](#), movies, books, [documentaries](#), and more, if you wish to reflect further on how Dolly expressed her faith and joy.

Prayer

Merciful and gracious God, thank you for indiscriminately pouring out your goodness on us, shining your light and sending your life-giving rain on good and evil alike. We confess we don't understand that kind of generosity, and find it hard to emulate it. But we thank you for the example of people like Dolly, who said she was a sinner and "no angel," and yet did her best to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, extending welcome and kindness to everyone. Help us to shine as light in the world, to bring hope and relief to suffering people whenever we have the opportunity, by the power of your Spirit. Amen!

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