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CPYU (D) REVIEW

By Walt Mueller

“Look What You Made Me Do”

by Taylor Swift



song/
video

Background/summary:

Pre-released on August 24, 2017 as the first single off Swift's upcoming sixth studio album, *Reputation* (11/10/17), the song has been labeled as a darkly thematic, lyrical, and visual departure from the singer's previous pop "good-girl" styling to a more edgy good-girl-gone-bad persona. The music video premiered at the end of August on the *MTV Video Music Awards* and quickly broke the record for most-watched video within 24 hours, with current views approaching the **500-million** mark late-September. The song quickly charted at #1 in the U.S. and several other countries.

(D)iscover

WHAT IS THE MESSAGE/WORLDVIEW?

- The song's content has caused quite a stir due to its' cryptic nature and the fact that Swift has suggested that people will have to wait and see if and when she offers clues to the song's meaning. Perhaps not since the release of the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper* album in 1967 has there been the kind of buzz, conversation, disagreement, and speculation over the meaning of visual and lyrical content in a song or album. For that reason, "**Look What You Made Me Do**" is difficult to subject to the discernment process. Still, there are numerous themes that are clear even though the objects of those messages are uncertain.
- The song's title reveals a theme of blame and anger that carries through the song both lyrically and visually. Swift begins by addressing someone who many say is Kanye West, with whom she's had an ongoing feud: "**I don't like your little games/Don't like your tilted stage/The role you made me play/Of the fool, no, I don't like you/I don't like your perfect crime/How you laugh when you lie/You said the gun was mine/Isn't cool, no, I don't like you.**"
- Revenge is clearly on Swift's mind as she postures and talks tough both lyrically and visually. She sings, "**I've got a list of names and yours is in red, underlined/I check it once, and then I check it twice, oh!**" which is a clear reference to the Burn Books used to record rumors, stories, and gossip about others as "The Plastics" did in the film *Mean Girls*.
- Swift eagerly looks forward to Karma's payback: "**The world moves on, another day, another drama, drama/ But not for me, not for me, all I think about is Karma/And the the world moves on, but one thing's for sure/ Maybe I got mine, but you'll all get yours.**" The "all" targeted by Swift's revenge/karma/payback fantasy is cause for speculation. Along with West, some have included Katy Perry in the mix due to the car crash scene in the video, which features Swift sporting a very-similar-to-Perry hairdo in a very-similar-to-Perry's video scene. Other possible targets include Swift's ex Calvin Harris, and perhaps even the media-at-large.
- Swift's metamorphosis is depicted in the video's outset as a zombie-looking version of herself climbs out of a grave. She follows-up by presenting herself as a powerful aggressor who will not allow herself to be pushed around anymore. She sings, "**I'm sorry, the old Taylor can't come to the phone right now/Why?/ Because she's dead!**" This new darker version of Taylor Swift uses the video to depict herself in positions of dominance and power (on a throne, dressed as a dominatrix, performing feats of strength, wielding a baseball bat, etc.).
- Almost lost in the video's visual imagery overload is the gender-bending depiction of Swift's male back-up dancers sporting hot-pants and stiletto heels. In today's current cultural context this is simply assumed as another identity option where gender identity is based on personal decision and desire.



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(D)iscern

HOW DOES IT STAND IN LIGHT OF THE BIBLICAL MESSAGE/WORLDVIEW?

- Our sinful human tendency is to cast blame on others rather than taking responsibility for our own attitudes and actions. The classic biblical example occurs in the Creation narrative (Genesis 3). As God confronts disobedient humanity the man blames it on the woman, who in turns blames her disobedience on the serpent. However, God issues a curse not just on the serpent, but on the man and woman as well, indicating that we are ultimately responsible for our own actions.
- The Christian understands that difficulty is always going to exist as broken people interact with other broken people in a horribly broken world. Rather than harboring bitterness, we must understand how in His grace, God uses difficulty to grow us in our faith. Suffering is good for us as it drives us deeper into God's Word (Psalm 119:71), develops our maturity (James 1:2-4), and leads us to take refuge in God (Psalm 16:1). God consistently takes that which was meant for bad and uses it for good to accomplish His purposes and bring glory to Himself (Genesis 49:1-50:26).
- Taking revenge is not an option for the follower of Jesus. In the Old Testament we read about Joseph responding with grace rather than vengeance to his brothers' evil schemes (Genesis 48-50), and David sparing Saul's life (I Samuel 24). Jesus instructs His followers to turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:38-42), and to love rather than hate your enemies (Matthew 5:43-48). The Apostle Paul instructs us to not repay evil with evil, to live at peace with others, and leave vengeance to the Lord (Romans 12:17-21). We are to forgive as the Lord has forgiven us (Colossians 3:13).
- Karma is not at all a Christian concept. It is rooted in the Buddhist and Hindu traditions. It promotes a works righteousness that has no place for divine grace. Paul calls us to bless (rather than wish ill will on) those who persecute us (Romans 12:14). Jesus desires that we would "do unto others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:31).
- Taylor Swift assumes a posture of arrogance and pride, especially when consciously putting aside her former image. The Scriptures consistently name pride as a sin to avoid and humility as a Godly virtue to pursue. Proverbs warns of the deadly path of pride: "When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom" (11:2).
- Unrighteous anger is to be avoided as it leads to sin (Ephesians 4:26,31). We are instructed to put to death and rid ourselves of anger, rage, malice, and slander (Colossians 3:5-11). Fools "give vent" to anger (Proverbs 29:11).
- The Creation narrative (Genesis 1:27) clearly communicates God's plan for gender, as He has created us either male or female. We are given our gender by God according to His design. Gender is not something that is fluid or a matter of choice.

(D)ecide

WHAT DO I DO WITH IT?

- You can be assured that most of your students have seen and heard "**Look What You Made Me Do,**" especially the girls in your youth group. Because there are so many directive messages regarding how to handle (mis-handle) interpersonal conflict, we suggest listening to the song with students to contrast Swift's response to her detractors with a biblical approach to conflict resolution, anger, rage, revenge, and difficult circumstances.
- Use the video in training settings with parents and youth workers to give them insight into 1) youth culture realities, 2) how culture is mapping beliefs and behaviors for students, and 3) to give them talking points for interaction with students. Teach them how to use the song as a springboard for engaging in narrative-shifting conversations in the manner Jesus himself used: "**You have heard it said that (the erroneous cultural narrative) . . . but I tell you (the biblical corrective) . . .**"
- View the video as a springboard to discussing biblical sexuality, gender identity, and the biblical order for male and female.