

“What Are Jesus’ Commandments?”
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Menifee United Church of Christ

A Sunday School teacher told her little children that she wanted them each to learn a fact about Jesus and talk about it next Sunday. The next Sunday rolled around and the teacher said to little Susie, “Little Susie, what did you learn about Jesus?” Little Susie said, “I learned that Jesus was born in a manger.” The teacher said, “Very good, little Susie.” Then the teacher said, “Little Bobby, what did you learn about Jesus?” Little Bobby said, “I learned that Jesus overturned the moneychangers’ tables in the Temple.” The teacher said, “Very good, little Johnny.” Then the teacher said, “Little Johnny, what did you learn about Jesus?” Little Johnny said, “I learned that Jesus drives a red pickup truck.” The teacher said, “Little Johnny, where did you learn that Jesus drives a red pickup truck?” Little Johnny said, “From my daddy.” Little Johnny said, “We were driving down the highway yesterday and a red pickup truck drove in front of us. My daddy said, ‘Jesus Christ, will you learn how to drive!’”

OK, so we know that Jesus does not drive a red pickup truck. But what do we know about Jesus? Well, one thing we know about Jesus is that Jesus’ parents were Jewish. Another thing we know about Jesus is that Jesus apparently became a rabbi. Another thing we know about Jesus is that, after Jesus was gone, Jesus’ followers founded the Christian religion, based on Jesus’ commandments. But what were Jesus’ commandments? Ah, that’s the sixty-four thousand dollar question!

Some Christians believe that Jesus’ commandments were something that Jesus never really commanded. Some Christians believe that Jesus commanded us to get a lot of money. At least more money than we have now. Some Christians believe that Jesus commanded us to get a bigger house. At least bigger than the house we have now. Some Christians believe that Jesus commanded us to get a bigger car. At least bigger than the car we have now. I hate to burst anybody’s bubble, but that’s not what Jesus commanded us to do. Those are nice things, at least positive, but those are not Jesus’ commandments.

Other Christians believe that Jesus commanded us to do some negative things, to do some hateful things. Some Christians believe that Jesus commanded us to hate Muslims. Some Christians believe Jesus commanded us to hate Jews. Some Christians believe that Jesus commanded us to hate gays. I, again, hate to burst anybody’s bubbles, but that’s not what Jesus commanded us to do. In fact, you can pretty much tell if Jesus commanded you to do something. If it involves hatred, then Jesus didn’t command you to do that. So, what did Jesus command us to do?

Jesus told his disciples about his commandments. According to the gospel of John, Jesus said, “Keep my commandments. When you keep my commandments, then you will be loved by God and you will be loved by me.” It sounds simple enough, doesn’t it? Just keep Jesus’ commandments. So, again, what were Jesus’ commandments?

Well, Jesus’ commandments were many and varied. Jesus’ commanded us to repent of our sins. Jesus commanded us to make disciples of all nations. And Jesus commanded us to pray always. But I want to concentrate on Jesus’ greatest commandments. So, what were Jesus’ greatest commandments?

Well, a Pharisee, a lawyer, asked Jesus, “What is the greatest commandment?” According to the gospel of Matthew, the Pharisee asked Jesus this in order to trip him up. But you can’t trip up Jesus! Jesus said, “To love God with all your heart, soul and mind is the greatest and first commandment. The second is like it, to love your neighbor as yourself. So, there you go, Jesus’ commandments to us. To love God, to love our neighbor, and also, really, to love ourselves. So three commandments from Jesus, the greatest commandments: love God, love your neighbor, and love yourself.

“So, Pastor, how do we love God, love our neighbor, and love ourselves?” Well, I’m glad I asked. We love God by spending time with God, by spending time with God’s word, the Bible. By praying, by listening to God, meditating, and by coming to church. (You knew I had to say that.) To love our neighbor means we help our neighbor whenever we can and whenever our neighbor is in need. (Here’s a little secret: everyone is our neighbor.) To love our self means to nourish our self in body, mind and spirit. We do that by learning, continuously, by eating and drinking and getting enough sleep, by taking care of our spirit, by lifting our spirit whenever we can. That’s how we love God, love our neighbor, and love our self. Those are the great commandments of Jesus.

Karen Armstrong knows what Jesus commanded us to do and knows what Jesus did not command us to do. Karen Armstrong was a nun early in her life and then she became a Biblical scholar and she’s written many religious books. Karen Armstrong says that Jesus never really spent any time discoursing about the trinity or original sin or the incarnation. Karen Armstrong says that Jesus just did good and acted compassionately. That’s what we’re to do. We’re to do good and act compassionately. Not discourse on the trinity or original sin or the incarnation, we’re just supposed to do good and act compassionately.

Notice that none of that includes getting more money or getting a bigger car or getting a bigger house and certainly none of that includes hating Muslims, hating Jews or hating gays. Those are not Jesus' commandments. Jesus commands us to love God, to love our neighbor, and to love ourselves.

This church follows Jesus' commandments. This church shows love for God by meeting on Sunday morning, by singing songs and hymns, by praying, by worshiping God, by taking communion as the disciples did. This church shows love for neighbor with our food pantry, with our clothing closet, and this church shows love for neighbor by helping out the Community Cupboard and Survival Ministries. This church shows love for ourselves by enjoying food and fellowship after worship, by having Bible study and a book discussion group once a week, by going for a beer and talking about religious issues. This church, I think, follows the commandments of Jesus, as we're all supposed to do. That's what Jesus calls us to do.

So why do some people get confused and think we're supposed to do these other things – get more money, get a bigger house, get a bigger car, hate Muslims, hate Jews, hate gays? I think because they don't really understand the Bible. They don't understand what I think is the most important verse in the Bible, which is I John 4:16, "God is love." If we all go by "God is love," then I don't think we can go wrong. So why don't we do that? As I say, because I don't think everybody understands the Bible. So for some help in understanding the Bible, let's turn to a standup comic.

Lewis Black came to Southern California a week or two ago. Lewis Black, as you may know, is Jewish. During his standup routine, he read a little newspaper clipping about this mayor, who is also a pastor in a small town someplace. The mayor/pastor urged his citizens to pray their potholes away because they don't have any money to fill the potholes. So he asked them to pray the potholes away, just as Moses, in the Old Testament, parted the Red Sea. He said if Moses could part the Red Sea, according to the mayor/pastor, then Christians should be able to pray potholes away. Lewis Black said: You Christians have your book, the New Testament, and we have our book, the Old Testament. Leave our book alone! He says that Christians have faith. Jews have sarcasm. He said: the story of Moses parting the Red Sea was just that – a story. It didn't really happen. And everybody laughed and applauded, including me.

"So, wait a minute, Pastor, are you saying that not every word of the Bible is literally true?!" Well, no, I'm not saying that, Lewis Black said that. "But you laughed and applauded!" Well, yeah, that's true. OK, yeah, I concur with Lewis Black. But again, remembering Karen Armstrong, let's not get hung up on things like original sin or the incarnation or the trinity. Let's just do good and act compassionately. And let's not get hung up on whether Moses parted the Red Sea, let's not get hung up on whether Jonah was swallowed by a whale and spit up on the shore, let's not get hung up on whether Noah built an ark or put all the animals two by two on the ark, whether that's a literal story, let's not get hung up on that. Let's just talk about doing good and acting compassionately.

The people of this church do do good and act compassionately. A member of this church volunteers at the Menifee Museum to educate people. Another member of this church has been a lifelong teacher and she continues to educate children in her semi-retirement as a substitute teacher. Another person in this church brings cookies to a group that meets here on Thursdays, just to give them a sweet treat. (Personally, I believe, if I were God, that there would be a special place in heaven for people who bring cookies to church.)

"Oh, but Pastor, I would do good and act compassionately, but I just don't know what to do." Let me make some suggestions: Let me suggest that you bring some cans of soup into our food pantry, because we're running low on soup. Try to make it the kind with the pop tops so that homeless people can open them without a can opener. Maybe, if you are concerned about what's happening in Washington, with all the proposed cuts, you could write a letter or two to your elected leaders, urging them not to cut services to the poor, to schoolchildren, and others in order to give a tax cut to the rich. Just a suggestion. There is a myriad of ways you can help.

"Help!" was a hit song by the Beatles a number of years ago and I think it applies to our topic today. The Beatles sang, "Help! I need somebody. Help! Not just anybody. Help! You know I need someone. Help!" We can all help in some way. And we all sometimes need some help. We shouldn't be afraid to ask for help and we shouldn't be afraid to help.

We shouldn't be afraid to follow Jesus' commands. A woman told me the other day that she was looking for a church in Menifee about a year ago. Somebody told her, "Well, don't go to that church (meaning ours). They have a scandalous pastor (meaning me) who does same sex weddings and who allows gays and lesbians into the church!" Oh, my goodness! She obviously wasn't afraid to come to our church. In fact, about six months ago she joined our church. I hope, in part, that she joined this church because she knows this church follows Jesus' commandments: to love God, to love our neighbor, and to love our self. (By the way, I'm going to have my business cards changed from "Reverend Bill Freeman, Senior Minister" to "Reverend Bill Freeman, Scandalous Pastor.")

What about you? Do you follow Jesus' commandments? I know just about everybody here and I know you do. I know you love God, you love your neighbor, and, in a good way, you love yourself. That's what Jesus commanded us to do: to love God, to love our neighbor, and to love our self. When we do that, we are making the world a little better. Now we all know that Jesus

does not drive a little red truck, like little Johnny thought. But we also know, thanks to the gospel of John, that when we follow Jesus' commandments – to love God, to love our neighbor, to love our self – then we will be loved by God and we will be loved by Jesus.

Let us pray:
God of love,
Help us to follow Jesus' commandments.
Help us to help others to follow Jesus' commandments.
And help us to know that, when we do that,
We are loved by Jesus and by you.
Now and forevermore.
By the power of the Holy Spirit.
And in the name of Jesus.
Amen.

*(This sermon was delivered without manuscript or notes
and was transcribed from a recording of it.)*