

Loving Jesus

John 14:15-21

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“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

When I read that statement from Jesus, it made me question myself. “Do I love Jesus? Of course I do. Well, then, I'd better do what he says. If I love him, I'd better obey him.”

So I thought to myself, “Ah, but what are Jesus' commandments?” At that point, I put on my grammar hat and turned back to the beginning of the Gospel According to John. My plan was to read through everything Jesus said (I used a red-letter Bible, so it was easier to identify the words of Jesus), and whenever I found the imperative mood, I would read it as a command, and then I would do it.

Jesus doesn't say much in the first chapter of John. When someone asks him where he lives, Jesus replies, “Come, and you will see.”¹ More of an invitation than a commandment, really. If you come to Jesus, then you will see him and know him.

Then I came to the second chapter of John. Jesus was at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. His mother had just asked him to do something about the embarrassing fact that the hosts had run out of wine. After Jesus gave a terse answer to his mother, Jesus turns to the servants of the house and, pointing to some large clay vessels, says to them, “Fill these jars with water.”²

There you go. Jesus made a command. I love Jesus, so I need to obey the command. So I went to the kitchen and found a few canning jars on our shelves. I unscrewed the lids and proceeded to fill them with water. After four or five jars I thought to myself, “Surely this isn't what loving Jesus looks like...”

You probably would've come to the same conclusion, but it wouldn't have taken five jars!

What that made me realize was I needed to discern which commands were specific instructions for a particular person in a particular situation, and which commands are the ones Jesus wants all of us to obey. So I continued my survey of John's gospel. What I found was that his commands, by and large, focus on our relationship with him. Mostly, Jesus' commands seem to focus on us embracing him, trusting him, walking in his steps.

¹ John 1:39

² John 2:7

When Jesus says, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments,” I think he’s saying that our love for him will draw us to be more and more like him, to live like he lived, to work for the things he worked for.

When we love Jesus in the demanding, self-giving way of the agape love of God, then we will obey him because that is the way for us to become more and more like him. It’s a good thing, not a drudgery or a burden. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life; he has already assured us of that. If we believe that, then why wouldn’t we obey Jesus? Why wouldn’t we want to live like Jesus? Why wouldn’t we want to love like Jesus?

There is a catch, though. There always is.

For one thing, it means there’s no looking back. Turning to Jesus means turning away from our old way of life. To love Jesus means that we must be willing to leave our old selves behind and instead live into the new creation we are in Christ. When Jesus commands people in the gospel to “stop sinning,” or to “go, and leave your life of sin,” that’s what he is reminding us: life in Christ means we don’t go back, we don’t return to our old ways.

It’s not easy, is it? To turn from an old, familiar way of life—even a way of life that isn’t working so well—and turning toward a life where the main instructions are “believe me, trust me, love me, follow me” is not easy at all.

But if we love him, we will obey him. Even when he says, “Don’t go back to that other way of life.”

Jill Duffield is the editor of the Presbyterian Outlook, a magazine that comes out about every two weeks. As editor, she also writes a weekly blog on the lectionary texts for the week. For today’s lesson about what Jesus says about loving him, namely that it means obeying him, she points out that “...love and trust go together. We can’t trust those who fail to keep promises, and keeping promises entails following the commandments God has set before us.” Then she also says that this bringing together of love and trust means that we follow Christ, abide in Christ’s love, and emulate Christ’s love in our own lives.³

Again, easier said than done. Because following Christ and abiding in Christ’s love and emulating Christ’s love means following him to people like the Samaritan woman at the well—a despised foreigner—and letting them know that there is a place for them in the Kingdom. It means following Jesus as he heals on the sabbath, forgoing the rules because grace and compassion demand it. It means following Jesus into the hungry crowds, where Jesus tells us to give them what we have. It means following Jesus to his encounter with the woman caught in adultery and instead of throwing the first stone he hands her forgiveness: “I do not condemn you; now go, and leave your life of sin.” It means following Jesus when he confronts the religious and secular authorities, calling

³ Dr. Jill Duffield, “Looking into the Lectionary,” <http://pres-outlook.org/2017/05/5th-sunday-easter-may-14-2017/>

them out for their hypocrisy and their failure to provide justice for the weak and vulnerable ones.

The Beatles sang a song, “All You Need Is Love”. Very hopeful, upbeat.

“Love, love, love, love. Love, love, love, love.

There's nothing you can do that can't be done.

Nothing you can sing that can't be sung.

Nothing you can say, but you can learn
how to play the game.

It's easy.”

It's that last sentence that caught my attention: It's easy. Surely they didn't know about the kind of love that Jesus commands of us.

To be sure, love may be all we need. But it's not easy. Not by a long shot. In fact, it's not even humanly possible.

That's why in between the first and last verses of this morning's lesson, where Jesus tells us of the necessity of a love that obeys him, Jesus also promises help: He promises the Holy Spirit to be with us. Forever. Jesus will not leave us alone. In the form of the Holy Spirit, Jesus will come alongside us and give us what we need in order to live into the loving obedience to which we are called.

People have had a hard time translating the Greek word that we see as “Comforter,” or “Advocate,” or “Helper.” The Greek word is “paraclete,” and New Testament scholar Dale Bruner notes that most instances of the word in the New Testament mean “to encourage, to urge”. It's an image of one walking alongside another, urging the other on, helping the other do what they need to do. In addition to the role of encouragement, the Holy Spirit is the spirit of truth—the truth-teller. When you think about it, who is it that you can count on to help you when you most need it—someone who will be honest with you and who will help you become the kind of person you need? It would be someone we would consider a true friend, wouldn't it? That's how Bruner ends up describing the paraclete, as our True Friend.

You and I are stronger, better able to do what Jesus calls us to do, because we have a Friend walking with us, right by our side.

So you see, what Jesus commands of us is something that we can't do—on our own, we cannot love and live like Jesus. But with the command, he also sends the gift of his presence—his forever, true-friend presence.

And with the gift, obedience to the command is now possible. It's possible, because the gift is Christ himself, walking with us and working through us.

So, love Jesus. Love him with all your being. Go ahead, you can do it. I know you can, because Jesus himself will help you.

Amen.