

Jesus Says...

A 30-Day Devotion

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With

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Introduction

When I was in grade school, I remember playing “Simon Says,” a simple game designed to teach the skills of listening and following directions. The game may be called something different, depending on where you live. The leader gives a series of commands which the listeners are to follow. The one basic rule is to only follow the commands that begin with the phrase “Simon says...,” i.e., “Simon says pat your head” or “Simon says clap your hands.” If a command like “Stomp your feet” is given, Simon didn’t say to stomp your feet, so the listeners are not to follow that order.

I want you to keep that simple game of listening and following in mind throughout this 30-day adventure.

Whenever people gather, there are rules or understandings in place. For instance, the military has standing orders. Businesses have standard procedures. Families have established rules of conduct and expectations. Jesus gave His followers something similar. Jesus said the following in Matthew 28:18-20

(NASB95):

“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

English translations of the Bible seem to put the emphasis on the word “go” since it comes across as a command. A look at the original language, however, paints a slightly different picture. The verb *going* is a state of being. The command, the imperative verb, is “make disciples.” This order is followed by the activities of making disciples through baptism and instruction. This passage could be rephrased in this way: “Make disciples everywhere you go, baptizing them and teaching them to follow all that I commanded you.” This command is our standing order, our standard practice, our family rule and expectation.

But what commands is Jesus addressing? What commands are we to teach followers of Jesus to observe? What other imperative commands did Jesus give His followers? This devotional adventure walks through thirty such commands of Jesus found in the Gospel accounts.

Thirty commands may seem like a lot to remember when you consider God only gave Moses Ten Commandants. But as John wrote, *“For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome”* (1 John 5:3, NASB95). I’ll tell you a little secret: all of the Jesus’ commands are in some way an expression of the greatest commandment, which is to love God with everything we are and to love our neighbor.

Are you ready to step into this thirty-day adventure of following Jesus? Fantastic!

Jesus Says, “Follow Me!”

Accurately interpreting what Jesus is saying necessitates visiting the meaning of *following* something or someone. We may *follow* someone’s posts on social media in a loose, barely touching kind of connection. We may *follow* a certain sport or team. But following a team runs the spectrum from being a fully invested fan to someone who checks the latest scores every now and again. In a more specific way, we may *follow* someone down the hall or on the road, although that type of *follow* may only mean we are traveling the same road at the same time. So, what does Jesus mean when He says, “Follow Me”?

The Gospels record many instances where Jesus invitingly commanded someone to “Follow Me.” Peter, James, and John along the shore of Galilee; Matthew, also called Levi, at his tax collector’s station; and Philip near Galilee all heard and followed. But not all who heard those words followed. The Gospels also recall Jesus’ inviting command to the rich young ruler and another unnamed man who wished to first bury his father.

They heard but turned away.

While these commands were spoken to individuals, other verses containing “Follow Me” were expressed as observational declarations. Consider John 10:27 (NLT), which says, *“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me”* and *“Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me’”* (Matthew 16:24, NLT). Lastly, *“Jesus spoke to the people once more and said, ‘I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won’t have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life’”* (John 8:12, NLT). All these verses connect with Jesus’ inviting command “Follow Me” and provides understanding for its intent.

No, following Jesus is not following à la Facebook or even that of an ardent sports fan. Following Him is a fully invested, life-on-the-line, feet-in-the-game choice. This kind of following is marked with intentionality, risk-taking, humility, and consistency that requires investment and self-denial. The closest personal comparison to which I can relate

this choice is my four years of high school football, but even that analogy falls short. Military service is similar in many respects, but following Jesus is not an exercise of uniformity but a discipline of conformity to Him.

Realizing that I may have left a reader behind, let me circle back for a moment. You may feel discouraged by that high bar of being “all in.” Thankfully, Jesus takes us where we are. As I think of being “all in,” I’m reminded of youth soccer and baseball programs—especially of those young ones who are on the field for the first time. They may not quite understand the rules of the game, they may run the bases backward or even shoot into their own goal. They may even get bored with the game and find other ways to amuse themselves on the field. But here’s the point: they are trying, they are listening to their coaches, they are learning, and they are on the playing field instead of sitting in the stands. Are you on the field?

Here’s the one big thing I’ve learned. Following Jesus is a day-by-day, moment-by-moment cycle of listening and obeying. Each step is taken

with intentionality, humility, extreme grace, and fearless love. Following Jesus means setting aside time—turning off our gadgets, tuning out the world, and focusing on Jesus by reading the Word, praying, and listening for the Holy Spirit’s nudge. Following means turning our heart toward Him as we encounter the joys and challenges of each day. Following also means doing the “stuff” of Jesus—stuff within the limits of our humanity and those “greater things” which are empowered by the Spirit. Jesus says, “Follow Me!”

Jesus Says, “Let Your Yes Be Yes”

As a youngster, I remember saying, “Cross my heart and hope to die” to cement my promises. Many comparable phrases range from “pinky-swear” to “on my mother’s grave.” Most of these are child’s play and a way to gain a feeling of surety or credibility. Simple oaths with no real power behind them are meant to shore up our promise. Examples of oaths that adults use include the oath to tell the truth when called as a courtroom witness. Even business contracts are a kind of oath with stipulations, expectations, and consequences upon failure. Oaths, vows, contracts, and covenants are a part of our everyday world.

This acknowledgment makes this “Jesus says” command somewhat challenging.

“But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. All you need to say is simply ‘Yes’

or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one" (Matthew 5:34–37, NIV).

The first question we must ask concerns the scope of Jesus' command. What kinds of oaths are being covered in this passage? The rash oaths of childhood? The off-the-cuff oaths between adults? The solemn oath to tell the truth? The contracts and covenants of the business world? How about the oaths we make to God? I believe Jesus covered them all.

The context of Christ's command is oaths before God. Taking an oath was a serious matter in the ancient Near East. The Bible contains several instances where someone spoke a rash oath, which was later kept at a great cost. Keeping our vows, oaths, and promises are important to God. Even God made oaths through various covenants in the Old Testament. The writer of Hebrews observes, "*When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself*" (6:13, NIV). This verse brings us to our second question.

If God could swear an oath, why shouldn't we?

This conflict is settled in the understanding that God didn't make covenants to bind Himself to His word. There was no need. *"For as many as are the promises of God, in Him they are yes; therefore also through Him is our Amen to the glory of God through us"* (2 Corinthians 1:20). God keeps His promises.

God entered covenant promises with all the accompanying oaths and actions to help those involved hold on to them. God will keep His word no matter if the promise is simply spoken or ratified with vows, oaths, and covenant actions. God made covenant promises to make faith in them easier to hold and to help the hearers trust that God said what He meant, which bring us to the final question.

What does this saying of Jesus mean for us? Is it wrong to swear an oath in court? What about speaking wedding vows or other solemn promises? Or entering into contracts and covenants? Is it right for a child to pinky-swear to confirm his word? Should we gird up our words by invoking a greater power or dire consequence?

The answer to these questions and others like them is found in God's own actions. Sometimes

speaking vows or entering a covenant is appropriate for the sake of the others involved. Where we tend to encounter trouble is when we make an oath or swear something is true to gird up our own credibility. Therefore, I find no issue with the courtroom oath. I will speak the truth whether the oath is administered. From my perspective, the oath is for the court's sake.

Let's make this topic a little more applicable to our day-to-day life because rare are the times when we're called to be a courtroom witness. In fact, I don't recall ever being one. But almost thirty-eight years ago, Betty and I stood before God, a pastor, our family, and our friends and made solemn covenant promises to each other. They were vows confirmed with the giving of rings, a covenant of love's promise. Let your yes be yes means keeping all those promises every day.

I think Jesus' command is meant to lead us to live a life of integrity where our "yes" really means "yes," and our "no" really means "no." Our word is to be our word and bond with no other vows needed. On one hand, it means being wise in making promises and obligations. On the other hand, it means remembering

our promises and doing them. Jesus says, “Let your yes be yes.”

Jesus Says, “Repent”

We don't use the word *repent* in normal everyday conversations although the direction-changing act is still a part of our experience. We may change our minds about any number of matters such as business decisions, emotional outbursts, an opinion, a desire, or our favorite flavor of ice cream. But the biblical concept of *repent* is more than simply being sorry about a decision or changing our minds about something. Repenting is more like stopping in our tracks, doing a 180-degree turn, and walking in a new and completely different trajectory.

Matthew records, “*From then on Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near’*” (4:17, NLT). This is the first general command spoken by Jesus and was the hallmark of His ministry.

We must first recognize that this is a specific repentance event. It wasn't simply changing our minds and going to church, although that may be the first step. This is a call to change all our thoughts, attitudes, and actions that are contrary to God's will.

A call to stop going our own way and turn around to walk with our face toward God. A complete change of direction and destination.

Jesus portrays this kind of repentance in Luke 15:11-32 with the parable of the lost son, also called the prodigal son. In short, the younger son left the family farm with his share of the wealth, went his own way, did what he wanted to do, and ran fast and far from all his father had taught him. Then he ran out of money...and friends. You could say that he came to the end of himself. Alone except for the pigs he was feeding and so hungry that the pig slop looked appetizing, the lost son repented. He stopped in his tracks, recognized his sin, and turned his face back toward home and his father. Upon meeting his father, the lost son said, *“Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son”* (Luke 15:21, NLT). The father didn’t take him back as a slave but restored him as his son. That restoration is what repentance looks like.

Here’s where we must examine our own lives, our own trajectories. Are we moving toward God or away from God? Not just in our outward behavior but in

our heart—our inward attitudes, desires, and thoughts. Repentance is more than merely glancing God’s way every now and again or hoping that God sees our good and ignores our bad. Jesus calls us to repent, stop in our tracks, turn around, and run into His arms with every part of our lives. Repentance is the first step toward forgiveness and being born from above (*saved, born again, converted, redeemed, and transformed*). So, what is your trajectory? What direction are your feet traveling, is your mind wandering, are your attitudes calling, your desires pulling, and your actions displaying? Perhaps the time has come to stop, turn around and run toward Jesus with every fiber of your being.

Lastly, repentance is not a one-time event but a way of life. Some of you may have read the above with an attitude of “been there, done that, took a picture, bought the t-shirt.” But in my own walk with Jesus, I’ve had to repent many times over as He continues to mold and shepherd my character. Who I am today as a follower of Jesus is not the same as the man I was thirty, ten, five, or even one year ago. Some of those steps required taking risks, others

demanded learning new things, many were steps of repentance, and all required faith and trust in Christ. I hope the same can be said of you as well. Jesus says, “Repent.”

Jesus Says, “Be Reconciled”

Conflicts and wounded relationships are never pleasant. They gnaw at us and erode our peace. These conflicts are like eating an extremely hot pepper which taints all the good that follows. These wounds can even affect our praise and worship of God. Jesus says, *“Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering”* (Matthew 5:23–24).

There are two “twists” in Jesus command. The first is the specific order of the actions. Their order shows how important our relationships with each other are to God. The picture Jesus paints is that of someone bringing an offering; in that day, it would have been grains or a live animal. Our offering today may be our time and finances. Somewhere between entering the Temple courtyard and the actual sacrifice, there is a lightning-bolt of remembrance. The first twist is that Jesus didn’t say to finish our

worship and then find our brother. No, the command is leave worship undone (breaking who knows how many social norms of the day), find your brother, and restore the relationship. Then come back and complete your worship.

The second twist is specific to the conflict—if you know that your brother has something against you. We often view conflict by our wounds, i.e., seeing things from our point of view. But Jesus is asking us to consider the wounds we may have caused others. Taking this approach is much harder as we may consider ourselves to be in the right or that the other person is being too sensitive. Perhaps we feel they deserved it. But Jesus didn't give us any wiggle room. If we know someone has something against us, then we need to do something about it.

We often come to worship and prayer as the aggrieved party—the wounded one seeking aid, comfort, and healing. And we should do that. But we must also remember that our sins grieve the Holy Spirit. Part of worship is restoring that connection with God and keeping our relationship in the right order (God is God, and I'm His creation). This

requires looking at ourselves from another's point of view—not only seeing where and how we are broken but how our words and actions may have wounded others, including God.

How can we be reconciled? The first way is trying to avoid hurting others in the first place. Paul wrote, *“Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men”* (Romans 12:17–18). The second way is to deal with the little things before they become a large pile. Small cuts and wounds may seem inconsequential at the time but can add up like the proverbial straw of camel fame. Thirdly, we must humble ourselves with a willingness to be wrong. Our pride will block reconciliation and peace. Last, we need to walk in forgiveness even if the other person isn't yet ready. In taking all these steps to reconciliation, there is a greater truth.

That greater truth is communication. Reconciliation, peace, and forgiveness can't happen unless there is communication. We must listen to one another and talk with one another. It is easy to make things right with God and never talk about the matter

with the others against whom we've sinned. By doing so, we enjoy the release of God's forgiveness but never release our own captives. God, you see, made the first step toward us and initiated reconciliation through Christ. We may also need to initiate the conversation instead of waiting for the other person to say something. Reconciliation always begins with one side stepping toward the other. Jesus says, "Be reconciled."

Jesus Says, “Don’t, Just Don’t”

This next Jesus-Says command causes much confusion and discomfort. Jesus says the following in Matthew 5:27–30:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell.”

Surely Jesus doesn’t mean for us to cut off our hands

or poke out an eye? In a physical sense, of course not. Jesus is making an over-the-top statement to drive home a point. So often we think that a certain sin is so much a part of us that if we remove it, we will cease to be who we are. Jesus made this point about adultery and lust-filled thoughts, but the thought really applies to everything. Indeed, these words are harsh and difficult but true.

We can spread out this command and include all forms of lust. My generation is steeped in the “if-it-feels-good-do-it” mantra. Basically, whatever we decide to do is acceptable. For example, those in my generation say, “Porn is a victimless crime.” The statement is not true for it at least hurts the one using it—even if the person fails to recognize it at the time. Paul said, *“Run from sexual sin! No other sin so clearly affects the body as this one does. For sexual immorality is a sin against your own body”* (1 Corinthians 6:18, NLT). Pornographic images, which change the way the user views intimacy, people, and relationships, sets unrealistic expectations that harm real relationships. And besides that, God says lust is a sin.

Lust takes many forms, and all of them are in some way self-centered and self-gratifying. Sexual lust; the lust for power, position, or acceptance; the lust for food or praise or money and possessions can consume us. All are forms of lust to be left alone or can be used to control others. Lust for anything eventually alters our mind or our mood.

Our lust can so entangle our lives that we may even fail to see it or see a way out. We can recognize these lusts and addictions by what happens when they are denied. Possible indicators include anger, depression, moodiness, whining, feelings of failure, self-pity, and believing that no one cares. These symptoms may reveal our own forms of lusts.

Victory over lust often requires a “cut-it-off” attitude. Cutting off the source may mean ending relationships, disconnecting our Internet access, refusing to carry a mobile phone, fasting from an indulgent thought, laying our passions and desires at the foot of the cross—and leaving them there. Since many lusts and addictions also have a right and proper use, a time of fasting is often helpful to bring them into order.

Here's the big point: those things that make us feel good may be the very things that are making it difficult for us to grow in Christ. I often ask this question: if Jesus told you to give it up (whatever the issue of the moment is), would you? If the answer is "no," then you have a heart issue. That person's need or lust has become a god in his or her life. If the person answers "yes," then I can trust the Holy Spirit to reveal the problem to them at the right time. I do this same exercise myself. I don't want anything to take the place of Jesus in my life. How about you?

A Practical Note: Overcoming some of the issues discussed in this chapter can be difficult and create guilt when we stumble and fall. My number-one guidance is to find local pastoral counseling to help you walk out of these issues. The first step is often talking with someone about the problem. You may also email me at dale@lambchow.com for prayer and support. The number-two guidance is to get up and keep going after a fall. Don't be discouraged; many have walked this same path and found victory in Jesus.

Jesus Says, “Repay Evil with Good”

A basic life lesson is that life isn't fair. We'd like it to be and try to create laws to make it so, but to date, no one has devised a law that truly makes life fair for everyone. Sure, some have tried, but differences based on something other than fairness always arise. The problem is that what is fair for one often isn't for another. We all have a sense of fairness that is colored by our desires, jealousy, fears, and loves.

Then Jesus comes along and upsets our perceptions of what is fair with four imperative commands. Jesus says,

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of

*you, and do not turn away from him
who wants to borrow from you”*
(Matthew 5:38–42).

Jesus’ basic premise is to go beyond the rigors of an eye-for-an-eye justice to where fairness costs something. Those four commands are turn, send, go, and give.

Turn

Our current President is famous for “hitting back.” The way he says it, if someone rhetorically hits him, he hits back twice as hard. In essence, he is living by the law of jungle that “an eye for an eye” was designed to correct. When someone hits us, whether with a punch, a word, a look, or a slight, our desire is to at least get even. We want to correct the wrong and to extract repayment. It’s fair to do, right?

The way of Jesus, the *command* of Jesus, is to offer the person a second hit instead of striking back. His answer isn’t striking back twice as hard, striking back stroke for stroke, or taking a punch and avoiding a second. Jesus’ command involves taking a punch

and putting ourselves in position to take another.

Send

This command is somewhat buried in the passage. Jesus says, “If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also.” The command is “*let him have.*” To put this verse in modern terms: if someone sues you for one hundred dollars, send the person two hundred...and do this before the lawsuit even goes to trial. Again, Jesus’ command is to go beyond fairness.

Go

Many times, saying “someone went the extra mile” indicates putting forth extra effort beyond normal expectations. But Jesus’ command isn’t about the amount of effort we apply; it again touches that basic idea of fairness.

In Jesus’ day, the occupying Roman army could legally conscript anyone to carry a load for one standard mile. This law played out when Jesus had been sentenced to death. Simon of Cyrene was forced to carry Jesus’ cross on the way to Golgotha (Mark

15:21). You could put it this way: if someone forces you to carry a load, then carry it twice as far. That load could be anything from a physical load to the person's emotional baggage.

Give

The final command is to give to those who ask. This command is unique among the four in that no prior evil action has taken place. When someone asks for a handout or to borrow something, the immediate response of most people is to weigh their truthfulness and worthiness. If I loan my power drill to my neighbor, I wonder if I will ever see it again. *Is the guy on the corner with the handprinted cardboard sign in legitimate need or is he fooling folks instead of getting a real job?* Jesus' statement has no preconditions—only a command to give and to loan.

What It All Means

So, we arrive at this point and wonder what Jesus was trying to say. Rarely does anyone slap me on the cheek. In fact, it has never happened. I've never been sued. There are no Roman soldiers or anyone else

who would force me to carry a pack for a mile. But folks who beg for handouts and neighbors who borrow can be a frequent occurrence. How do we apply these commands to today?

I think that Jesus' point was to discard our ideas of fairness and justice. Before Moses, fairness was unbalanced. Retribution was stronger than the offense. The Law of Moses balanced the scales with "an eye for an eye." Jesus is commanding that we unbalance the scales in the favor of others—even if their actions and motives are evil.

Following this command could play out at work by buying lunch for that co-worker who is always riding us. Pay for a restaurant order even when everything served was wrong. Help those who ask without weighing their worthiness. Following this command means giving to folks what they don't deserve. Give love in the face of hate. Give patience in the face of pushiness. Give forgiveness in the face of offense. We are not to resist evil with evil; rather, we are to answer it with good that costs us something.

Jesus did this very thing for us. In the face of the slap of our sin, He died for us. I think Jesus' point is

that we should do the same for others. Jesus says,
“Repay evil with good.”

Jesus Says, “Love All”

Kerry Rohman

As an adult, removing myself from chaos sounds peaceful and relaxing. As a child, however, I thought this time of sitting out was boring, seemed like an eternity, and well, was absolutely terrible. *Like mother, like daughter*. This week, my five-year-old daughter, Ava, had to experience the ever-dreaded TIME OUT. Her Legos, Barbies, and Shopkins would not magically put themselves away as she had hoped. Neither did moping around and complaining work to excuse her from her job. When I sent Ava to the brown owl beanbag, tears started flowing down her face. Then came the phrase, “You don’t love me anymore!”

Whether she was trying to be manipulative is not the point. The point is that I had a choice to make. And in this moment of childish rebellion and stinging words, I chose to love Ava unconditionally. Choosing to love her and saying so is easy for me—even when she is making unwise choices—just like God loves His children.

But, not so fast, let's change the situation. If love is a choice, do we HAVE to choose to love everyone unconditionally? You know, those people in our life who are what Rick Warren, the pastor of Saddleback Church and the author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, calls "EGR people" (Extra Grace Required people).

Let's see what Jesus says about that question in His Sermon on the Mount:

"But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?" (Matthew 5:44-46).

I just want to let out a huge "ughhh" when I read that Scripture. Yes, I know, I should *"Do everything without arguing and complaining"* (Philippians 2:12).

Yup, Jesus doesn't simply suggest loving enemies; He commands it. Honestly, for me, unconditionally loving and sincerely praying for those enemies who have wounded my heart at the deepest level is often hard work! Unfortunately, when I started this journey that I am still on, I found I need to improve in different areas.

I needed to transition from conditional love to unconditional love. Conditional love may say: "I will only love that person if he or she will listen to me, agree with me, love me back, won't hurt me, speak highly of me, they treat me well," and so forth. Conditional love places prerequisites, restrictions, and expectations on how someone should act or respond. However, we are not in control of how a person expresses himself or herself. If our reasons for loving others depend on their qualities, and those qualities gradually disappear, our basis of love has disappeared.

Only unconditional love lasts a lifetime. Loving unconditionally does not mean we love without boundaries or do not guard our heart. We choose to give the gift of unconditional love, even from a

distance, without expecting anything in return. Unconditional love says: “I CHOOSE to love that person even if he or she won’t receive me, doesn’t love me in return, hurts me, slanders my name, mistreats me, fails to meet my expectations,” and so forth. Remember, “*love never fails*” (1 Corinthians 13:8)—no matter what.

Another area of growth on my journey was fully receiving, experiencing, and understanding Christ’s love for me. I discovered that trying to give away something I had never fully received was difficult. I only noticed this issue after doing the Lambchow Bible study on “Love” found at the following web address: <https://lambchow.com/free-bible-study-love/>. When I started to receive more love from Jesus and others freely, I was able to freely give love in increased measure as well.

Trying to see others the way Jesus sees them also helped me be more loving. I really pressed into asking Jesus to reveal to me how He sees His children. I even journaled positive character traits of those EGR people in my life and included prayers for them.

I am still on this journey of growing in and

pursuing unconditional love. Sometimes, I become discouraged, but I try to give myself grace and unconditional love—just like I try to do with others. Ava did end up picking up her toys. Are you wondering, *but what if she hadn't?* Well, love is not determined by the recipient of the love, but rather the one choosing to show love. Just like Ava's mess involved not picking up her toys, my mess involved conditional love. You could say in today's vernacular, Jesus is leading me to “pick up my toys.”

We too can drag our feet about loving someone exactly like Ava dragged her feet with picking up her toys. Is this matter of giving unconditional love an area where you need to “pick up your toys”? Are you dragging your feet instead? Jesus says, “Love all.”

Jesus Says, “Be Perfect in Love”

We all have a sense of perfect. We know what we like and what we don't. Perhaps we can describe our perfect day or our perfect spouse or how perfect children would behave. The problem is that perfect demands 100 percent accuracy. Deviate by .00001, and the *perfect* is only *near* perfect. But our human understanding of perfect is not comparable to the Bible's understanding of the word, which is both a relief and a challenge.

Jesus closes His explanation about love by saying, “*Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*” (Matthew 5:48). If “perfect” means 100 percent accuracy without any deviation, then we're off the hook. It is literally impossible for us to be perfect like God is perfect. He's God—all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving God! We know that Jesus would not give us an impossible task, so what is He really saying?

The context of Jesus' statement is His explanation of love—as in real *agapé* love, which is an unconditional God-like love. So, we can narrow the

scope of Jesus' demand to "be perfect" to "be perfect in *agapé*, unconditional, God-like love." Even that is a far stretch because it means loving everyone. You don't fall into *agapé* love; you choose it. But we are still left with a problem: can we ever love *perfectly*—as we understand the word?

The word translated into *perfect* has the idea of being complete and wholeness, i.e., nothing left out. This idea is different than our typical understanding of perfection. Though still a challenge, the picture changes from one of instantly loving perfectly like God with zero deviation to one of loving with everything we are at this moment. Impossible to possible. And although the verse doesn't give us a picture of movement and growth, experience and other Scriptures grant us that grace.

There are four stages of love's growth in us.

1) Blindness. We don't yet see the need. These folks are outside our scope. They may be invisible to us or unwanted by us, but we do not see the requirement to love them.

2) Illumination. We see and understand that there are others we need to love. The blindness is gone, but

actions have not yet happened. We understand, but we haven't loved.

3) Exploration. We seek for the right ways to express love. This stage requires interaction and choice. Remember! We're talking about God's kind of love—not romantic love. During this phase, we explore what it means to “lay down our lives” for them.

4) Completion. *Agapé* love is fully integrated on our side.

But here's the bottom line: we will be in all four stages at the same time as we grow into *agapé* love. There will be some folks we simply don't see, areas in someone's life that we don't yet love and are also blind to. The same holds true with illumination, exploration, and completion. For me, the problem area is between illumination and exploration. In many instances I'm no longer blind about the need to love, but I don't necessarily understand how to move, or I am too fearful to take that next step. But here's the good news: we're not alone in this journey. We have not been left to stumble about in the darkness to figure this out.

We don't go from blindness to illumination without the Holy Spirit. Neither do we go from illumination to exploration or exploration to completion without Him either. I think another command of Jesus plays a huge role in this process: *"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened"* (Matthew 7:7–8). Keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking. God loves perfectly and enjoys showing us how to love. *Lord, shine Your light on our blind spots and show us how to fully love all those we see and give us the boldness to follow through.*

Jesus says, "Be perfect in love."

Jesus Says, “Seek First”

IKEA is famous for providing instructions without words. Simply follow the picture diagrams, and that pile of wooden pieces and hardware will become a nightstand, a bed, a coffee table, or a chest of drawers. The instructions lay out an order of construction, though there are likely several ways to successfully complete the build. Who says the frame needs to be built before the drawers? But IKEA, for reasons that are not always clear, chose to prioritize the order of the build in a certain way. Our next Jesus-says command speaks to the order in which we build our lives.

The key verse is Matthew 6:33 where Jesus says, *“But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you”* (6:33). To get the full impact of what Jesus is commanding, the context must be addressed.

This section of the Sermon on the Mount is firmly connected to the conclusion of the previous section. Jesus concludes, *“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he*

will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth” (Matthew 6:24). This verse is the underlying premise for what follows. No one can serve two masters whether that is God and money, self, family, or our worries.

Jesus then pulls in two needs that most of us would put very high on our list of priorities: the need for food and clothing.

“For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?”
(Matthew 6:25)

Jesus further explores this need in the following verses with the examples of birds and wildflowers. The emphasis is on God’s provision and the avoidance of worry.

“Do not worry then, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear for clothing?’

For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things”
(Matthew 6:31–32).

Now, I write this chapter knowing full well that, for some readers, meeting these two needs is a daily concern. Neither Jesus nor I are minimizing your need, only placing it within a grander context. Our worries can cause us to lose sight of so many things. Worry blinds us to God’s provision. Such provision may be our job or business, our personal labor of farming and gardening, or it could be the grace of others. One form of provision is the stretching of food and items beyond their normal boundaries. Shoes take longer to wear out, cars continue to work even when they shouldn’t, accidents we don’t even know about are avoided. God provides for His children in many ways.

Only after covering all that preliminary ground does Jesus say, *“But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you”* (Matthew 6:33). This verse doesn’t mean that

should we sit back and wait but that we prioritize God in our lives. We thank God for the day when our eyes first greet the morning. We thank Him for the joys and challenges as they come our way. We seek after God in our day and listen for the nudge of the Holy Spirit. We still go to work, and we still take care of what we do have. We even plan for future needs, but in all that our heart is turned toward God—not the worries and anxieties of the need.

I believe that Jesus knew following this command would be hard for us. After saying to “seek first,” Jesus gave us one other piece of wisdom: “*So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own*” (Matthew 6:34). Take one day at a time. If that is too hard, then take one step at a time. And if even that is too hard, take one breath at a time. But whether our day is easy or troubled, the command remains to continually seek first—before anything else—God’s kingdom and righteousness. That’s how a God-glorifying life is built even when there is only enough for one meal or we have only the clothes on our backs. Jesus says, “Keep seeking His kingdom and

righteousness before everything else—even our greatest worry.”

Jesus Says, “Do Not Judge”

A simple rule of nature states if you plant a kernel of corn, you will get corn. Assuming a healthy stalk of corn produces two ears, some 1600 kernels came from that one seed. That same multiplication effect applies to every plant of which I’m aware—even thistles and nettles. Jesus has this multiplication effect in mind when He says, “Do not judge.”

From the Gospel record, apparently Jesus made this statement more than once. In Matthew’s record of the Sermon on the Mount, verses 1 and 2 say, “*Do not judge so that you will not be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you.*” But we tend to think that this is a one-for-one exchange. If I judge someone harshly, then I will be judged harshly in return—whether by the person I am judging or by someone else. But there’s more to Jesus’ warning than meets the eye.

First, what Jesus meant by judging must be established. The plain meaning of *judge* is “to determine guilt and punishment.” In other words, this

judging is to condemn. There's a world of difference between offering a warning to someone and condemning them, which is exactly where Jesus takes this kind of judging in Matthew. He gives us the visual of judging the speck in our brother's eye while we have a beam in our own. The bottom line...we're not the judge, God is. We are simply the witnesses.

This doesn't mean that we won't be accused of judging. Simply being a lighthouse for Jesus will cause others to feel convicted. We must, however, be on guard against pointing the finger of judgment. Oh, how the church has stumbled at times on that one. Pointing fingers of judgment have kept many from receiving God's grace. But there are times when we are not being judgmental, and folks will still feel judged. That's not on us, and the conviction may very well be the work of the Holy Spirit in their heart.

There is more to Jesus' warning against judgment than we may know. In a similar command in Luke, Jesus says,

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; and do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; pardon, and

you will be pardoned. Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure—pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return”
(Luke 6:37–38).

Many times, we lean into verse 38, “*give, and it will be given...*” without realizing that Jesus is lumping judgment and condemnation into that same multiplication factor. Our judgment of others is not returned one for one but is “pressed down, shaken together, and running over.” What you plant you will reap many times over unless God’s grace intervenes. Plant kernels of judgment and reap bushels in return. Plant condemnation and reap a harvest of condemnation. Plant kernels of grace and gather a wagon load of grace. Get the picture? Jesus didn’t only say “do not judge” because it is not our place but also because of the ever-multiplying ramifications.

In considering this same topic Paul concluded, “*Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but*

rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way.” (Romans 14:13)

We may feel that our judgment is justified, and perhaps it is, but how will God judge us when our judgment makes it harder for someone else to receive God’s grace?

Finally, consider this one thought. What would you prefer to be poured out, pressed down, shaken together, and running over in your life? Judgment or grace? Condemnation or mercy? Rejection or love? Jesus says, “Do not judge one another.”

Jesus Says, “Take Up Your Cross”

As we explore our next “Jesus Says” command, remembering the previous one: “Jesus Says, ‘Do Not Judge One Another’” is extremely important. Today’s command often causes folks to compare themselves with others. They compare either in the sense of pride, “I’m better than Joe over there” or in a sense of judgment as, “So and so aren’t Christians; just look at their lives.” We get this wrong in so many ways, but there is one way to get it right. Jesus says to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Him.

This command is repeated in Matthew, Mark, and Luke with Matthew’s and Luke’s being nearly identical with one small difference. That one-word difference in Luke’s quote provides some necessary perspective.

“And He was saying to them all, ‘If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for

My sake, he is the one who will save it'' (Luke 9:23–24).

That one-word difference is *daily*.

Understanding that Jesus' command is something to be done every day removes the laxity of only denying ourselves on certain days. This command is not a Sunday only following Jesus. But again, neither does Jesus' command grant us permission to judge another believer's freedom. Another trap is to follow a religious list of do's and don'ts and assume that we are obeying His command. Maybe we are, but it is more likely that we are following someone else's convictions and not our own Holy-Spirit-driven convictions.

This command of Jesus is personal. How the Holy Spirit prompts me to deny myself may be different than how He prompts you. Sure, there are some universal do's and don'ts, but I think that Jesus was pinpointing the things in our lives that keep us from fully following Him. For some that could be the TV. For others alcohol. Or sports. Or family. Or hobbies. Or certain friends. Or certain possessions. Or certain

desires. Or even certain foods. There is no single mandate for any of these, but they could, if elevated above God, cause us to stumble and fall. Denial of these, sometimes for a time and sometimes for all time, keeps us on the right path.

It may seem that “taking up our cross” is simply a repeat of denying ourselves. It isn’t. Denying ourselves leans toward the passive end of things while taking up our cross is active. It is something we do. But exactly what does it mean to carry our cross? Jesus didn’t define the command, but He did demonstrate it.

So often we think that the various trials of life are our cross to bear. Or perhaps it’s the sin habit we have a hard time avoiding. Perhaps some think the cross is the evilness of the world in which we live. Surely some will point to a determined life of self-denial as the cross we are to bear. May I submit that while these may have their purpose, they are not the cross Jesus was speaking of.

Jesus didn’t see His cross as a trial of life or a sin habit to be beaten. While His cross was an evil instrument of torturous death, Jesus didn’t bear it to

make a point about its wrongness. And while there was self-denial in His carrying the cross, it was a means to a greater end—not the end itself. You see, Jesus carried His cross out of love.

Jesus' cross was not just any love. It was, it is, a self-sacrificial love that willingly gives up life for another. We can do all the things that look like cross-bearing and totally miss it because we lack the motivation of love. Bearing our cross daily means loving God and loving others in ways that cost us something. It may mean self-denial, it may mean struggling against the evil in the world, it may mean choosing to avoid the traps of sin. Seeing our cross through the example and motive of Christ changes everything.

The third leg of Jesus' command is to follow Him. That specific command was covered in a previous chapter. Let's pivot just a bit to consider a hard truth. To follow Jesus, we must also walk in self-denial and in cross-bearing love. We do not necessarily follow the religious dictates of any order, community, or church culture but according to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. But don't get me

wrong, being in a community of believers is vital to our walk with Jesus.

To be honest, following a list of do's and don'ts is easier, but a litany of rules is not the pattern Jesus gave us. Taking up your cross calls for honesty and not using our liberty as a doorway to sin. Rather, it calls for a listening heart that is willing to obey out of love. It calls for elevating the needs of others above our own without the expectation of return. It calls for self-denial born of a love for God and for each other—a love like Jesus' love which willingly carried the cross for you and me. Jesus says, “Deny yourself, take up your cross every day, and follow Me.”

Jesus Says, “Do Unto Others”

Ben Hoerr

It would be safe to say that no one’s writings or sayings are as well-known as those of Jesus. After all, the Bible, which contains the only record of His life, teachings, and sermons, is the most popular-selling book of all time. His stories are compelling, memorable, and life-changing if not also mysterious and deeply profound. Of all the things Jesus said, perhaps one command stands above almost all the others. We call it “the Golden Rule” because it is so simple, brilliant, and potentially world-changing.

Near the end of His famous “Sermon on the Mount” (or “Talk on the Hill”), Jesus instructed His followers to *“Do to others whatever you would like them to do to you. This is the essence of all that is taught in the law and the prophets”* (Matthew 7:12, ESV). In this one sweeping command, Jesus summarized all that the Old Testament Scriptures taught about love and relationships.

Other cultures and religions contain instruction that is like the Golden Rule. But the texts from

Confucianism (“Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you”), Hinduism (“This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you”), and Buddhism (“Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful”) are stated negatively and rely on passivity. Jesus’ Golden Rule is a positive command to show love proactively.

Every person would agree that we desire to be treated respectfully, honestly, with dignity and value, kindly and courteously, mercifully, with tolerance for differences, forgiven for our many faults, graced with second and third chances, and to be given the benefit of the doubt. These, then, are the very ways we are to treat others. Can we imagine a home, neighborhood, workplace, church, community, village, town, state, or even a nation where everyone related to others in these ways? How much of our world’s current problems, vitriol, hatred, and division would suddenly disappear? Wars would cease; hatred and mistrust would disappear; genuine care for our neighbors would rise; the poor, outcast, refugee, infirm, elderly, and handicapped would be generously be provided for; and extortion, theft, and other crimes would

diminish! Workplaces would be productive and joyful. Communities would be free from fear and suspicion. Schools would be havens for everyone to grow, learn, and thrive. Churches, temples, and mosques would get along. What a wonderful world it would become—almost like heaven on earth. Perhaps that’s what Jesus had in mind for all people in every culture.

In my former job as a human resource manager at a large church, I managed approximately 85 full- and part-time staff members. Like any mid-sized organization, we had our share of personnel problems such as tardiness, conflict between staff, failure to complete tasks on time, some petty thievery, and the like. While often tempted to “cut our losses” and fire such employees after their second warning, I was frequently reminded by the Holy Spirit of these simple, powerful guiding instructions. Understanding that I would appreciate leniency, consequently I often granted the employee mercy and another chance. This is one simple illustration at how things can change in our world—at work, in the home, between neighbors, in the marketplace, with vendors or customers, in our

clubs or community groups—when we practice the Golden Rule.

The command to proactively love others is the clarion call of following Jesus. It's how others will know that we are His disciples. But it's certainly not easy to love in these ways, is it? No, because we are naturally prone to stubborn self-centeredness, stinginess, attending to our needs first and foremost.

Fortunately, Jesus didn't leave us to our own strength, power, or resources when it comes to loving others. He comes to live in our heart through His very own personal presence in the Holy Spirit. We can pray daily to be filled with the Holy Spirit (see Ephesians 5:18) who empowers us to deny our selfish ambition and intentionally love others in the ways we'd like to be treated! Jesus says, "Do to others whatever you would like them to do to you."

Jesus Says, “Enter the Narrow Gate”

Which gate will you open? Which path will you follow? We are faced with these questions daily but take little thought of them. Do we follow the crowd? Do we go along to get along or play the part of the rebel? I remember my high school football coach saying that there was the right way, the wrong way, and *his* way. You can guess which way he wanted his team to go. But in the end, the choice is still ours. Jesus said,

“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matthew 7:13–14).

We know the power of the crowd—how following its ways can be fulfilling, satisfying, and loaded with confirmation. We often judge success by the size of the crowd and its engagement. It used to be that we would need to seek out the crowd, but now

through social media, we can invite it into our homes. But the crowd is fickle with attitudes and rules that quickly change. The crowd can also be mean, especially when someone rejects their direction. Rejection is the one real thing the crowd hates.

Perhaps identifying the broad highway and large gate that leads to destruction is easy. But it is much harder to identify the small gate and the narrow path that leads to life. On the surface, separating from the crowd and doing our own thing by putting away all our connections to the outside world would seem to be it, but it's not. You see, a life of determined separation from the crowd is still being motivated by the crowd, only in a negative sense. We can avoid all the crowd-like words, actions, and thoughts and still be controlled by the crowd. That is not the narrow way.

That small narrow gate is Jesus—not Jesus in a religious sense filled with the rules of another crowd but Jesus in the real and personal sense. The way is so narrow that a crowd won't fit through it.

Following Jesus often contradicts common sense. We come to Him one on one, but practice faith in

community with others on the path. The way is narrow but open to all who discover it. Even though it seems like a binary choice of this way or that way, it is really His way. Neither are we looking back trying to discern what Jesus would do; rather, we are listening for what Jesus wants us to do now.

In this command, Jesus lays a choice before us: follow the crowd or follow Me. You can't do both. Yes, sometimes we will be in large groups; sometimes we'll be alone with the Holy Spirit. The number of those around us is not the point; it's the direction we're traveling and why we are going that way which matters.

The way is narrow that leads to life. In the Gospel of John, Jesus said,

“Yes, I am the gate. Those who come in through me will be saved. They will come and go freely and will find good pastures. The thief’s purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life” (John 10:9–10, NLT).

Jesus says to enter the narrow gate.

Jesus Says, “Beware of False Prophets”

Warning signs are all around us. Danger: Falling Rocks. Deer Crossing. High Wind Area. These signs don't guarantee what is coming next but what *may* come our way. Where we live, deer are a problem. You never know when one will race in front of your car. While there is always a certain level of alertness while driving, it gets kicked up a few notches during twilight and evening hours. Not only am I watching the road, other traffic, and navigating but also scanning for “eye-shine”—that telltale glow when an animal is near the roadway. It's that kind of alertness Jesus is commanding when He says, *“Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they?”* (Matthew 7:15–16).

A false prophet is not one who simply misspeaks or has a different understanding from us on certain theological issues. Rather, a false prophet is one who is hiding his or her true motive. False prophets are

often the most sheep-like, at first anyway.

Jesus says that we will know them by their fruits. We must maintain a basic assumption that folks really are trying to follow Jesus until their fruit bears them out. Light will always penetrate darkness no matter where it tries to hide. So, eventually, the false prophet's true nature and motives will be revealed. How do they handle being lovingly corrected? What is the outcome of their words? Does the fruit of their actions glorify Jesus, themselves, or something or someone else? But even those are mere glimpses which can be misused.

We can't always go by someone's words. Even Jesus said a few verses later in the book of Matthew that on the day of judgment many will cry out, "*Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?*" (Matthew 7:22). And to this question, Jesus will say, "*I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS*" (Matthew 7:23b).

The fruit is whether what is said and done is the will of the Father (v. 21). Jesus was not condemning

all prophecy, or spiritual warfare, or performing miracles. He was condemning the hearts that did these things in the name of Jesus without ever bothering to ask, seek, knock, and listen for the direction of the Holy Spirit. They were on their own agenda and not on the Father's agenda.

Jesus' command doesn't include an "if...then." *If* while being alert, you discover a false prophet, *then....*" He commands us to beware and to rest in His judgment. Unless they repent, they will bear the ultimate consequences of being rejected on that last day.

False prophets and teachers exist even today. They can be found in the lone wolves declaring strange doctrine and in organizational piety that no longer seeks God's will or kingdom. Many will cry "Lord, Lord!" and be sent away with the bone-chilling words of "I never knew you." Jesus says, "Beware of false prophets."

Jesus Says, “Abide in Me”

Sometimes, when someone comes up and says, “Let me ask you a random question,” I will jokingly respond “42” before they even have a chance to ask it. According to Douglas Adams in *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, “42” is the answer to the meaning of life, the universe, and everything. It isn’t, of course; it is simply a number which Adams admittedly plucked out of thin air. But what if I told you there is an answer to the meaning of life, the universe and everything else, and that answer is found in a command?

Jesus said, “*Abide in Me, and I in you.*” How in the world is that the answer to the meaning of life, the universe, and everything? Jesus, knowing that we would have a hard time understanding this directive, gave us a simile. “*As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me*” (John 15:4b). In the same way that a branch is fruitless and dead unless attached to the vine or tree trunk, so is our life if we are not connected to Jesus and He with us. Jesus continues,

“I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned”
(John 15:5–6).

That’s the meaning of life—to bear fruit.

Jesus doesn’t describe the fruit. The apostle Paul identified the fruit of the Spirit as love, joy peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Want to grow more of these kinds of fruit? Abide in Jesus and He in you.

While that passage may solve the riddle of the meaning of life, what about the universe and everything else? Jesus wasn’t finished. He goes on to say,

“If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples”
(John 15:7–8).

There is a stark math going on here. This math shows us that if our prayers aren't being answered, perhaps we aren't abiding in Jesus and He in us. But before we see that as a path to personal wealth, we must take a step back.

If we are honest for a moment, nearly all of us would admit that we accepted Jesus to solve a problem or crisis in our lives. That crisis could have been based on our guilt or need. We wanted Jesus to make our lives better and to have them make sense. And that is perfectly fine! But as we grow in Christ, our focus must change from what we can get from God to what we can give to God. From getting to glorifying. Our prayers then become focused on what the Father wants instead of our own desires.

Let's be clear. Jesus is not making a suggestion; rather, He's stating a command and showing us how it all works. Want the fruit of love, joy, peace...in your life? Abide in Him and He in you. Want your prayers answered? Abide in Him and He and His Word in you. Want to grow in Christ? Abide in Him and He in you. We can't do any of these on our own.

Abiding in Jesus and He in you is the answer to life, the universe, and everything.

At this point, we need to stand on the brakes since one huge question is yet unasked: how do we abide in Jesus and He in us? I know how to plug in a lamp; how do I plug into Jesus? The first step is to ask Him into your life. He will only abide with you if you ask. And He will only abide in you to the degree that you allow. If you keep a door locked, He won't break it down.

We abide in Him by talking to Him morning, evening, and every moment in between. By listening to Him in our hearts and through His Word. By reading the Bible. By hanging around others who are also abiding in Jesus. We don't simply abide in Jesus for an hour on Sunday or a few minutes in the morning but every moment of every day. We aren't rechargeable batteries that only need to be connected when we run dry. We are like branches that need a constant flow of nourishment from the vine. Jesus says, "Abide in Me!"

Jesus Says, “Ask for Workers”

I’m a fixer by trade. It began with a few mechanical things around the house. I graduated to the electronics of old radios, TVs, and VCRs. I eventually tried to make that into a business and learned that I’m not a businessman. I then got hired to fix copy machines and eventually computers and computer networks. Two realizations came out of that God-given ability:

- Fixing things is often providing a solution to a problem instead of simply repairing something.
- Sometimes the customer needs more repair than the device.

However, another piece of the puzzle needed to be good at fixing things is to understand and respond according to the urgency of the need.

Understanding the urgency and doing something about it is the root of today’s “Jesus Says” command. Matthew records that one day Jesus was ministering to the crowds, healing the sick and proclaiming the

good news of God’s kingdom. But the crowds were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. Turning to His disciples, He said, “*The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field*” (Matthew 9:35–38, NIV). The command is “ask.”

The English translation loses a bit of the emphasis. This “ask” means with urgency like pleading for someone to open his home to a stranger on a cold winter’s evening. The urgency of the need is reflected in the urgency of our “asks.”

But notice something. Jesus is commanding us to ask for *others*, to look beyond our need and look to the need of the harvest field around us. Praying for ourselves is not wrong but praying *only* for ourselves is wrong. For this “ask,” we need our eyes opened to see others as Jesus does. We need pliable hearts to move with compassion as He was/is moved.

Jesus was also specific—send workers. We don’t need programs as much as we need willing and open hearts. We don’t need government aid as much as we need folks who move according to the winds of the

Holy Spirit. We don't need fences to keep people from hurting each other as much as we need shepherds who can lead. Jesus implores us to pray with urgency for workers to enter the field. I wonder, though, if there isn't an implied desire that those praying would also become those very same workers.

In the early chapters of the Old Testament book of Isaiah, a scene is set. *"In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord..."* Isaiah writes. In Isaiah's vision, God calls out from His throne, "Who will take this message?" Isaiah, in his weakness, cries out, *"Here I am, send me."* In my view, our prayer for workers should include the "ask" to "send me."

Does this mean that we should all pick up and move to some foreign soil? No, although some may be asked to do so. The harvest fields are all around us; we only need eyes to see and a heart to move. You could be God's answer to someone's urgent prayer of concern. Therefore, the response to this "Jesus-says" command is to urgently pray for others—for the lost, hopeless, harassed, and helpless, and to also cry out "Send me!" Jesus says, "Ask for workers."

Jesus Says, “Don’t...Do...Don’t be Afraid”

Let’s say for a moment that we’re trying to find a radio transmitter hidden in a barren desert. We mark one point and gain a general direction. We move to another spot which narrows down the area even more. But to precisely locate the transmitter, we need a third point. Then using that information, we can triangulate the position of the transmitter. That process of triangulation is illuminating as we consider our next “Jesus Says” command:

“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.” (Matthew 10:28–31, NIV)

In the text are three commands: “Do not be afraid...” “Be afraid...” “Don’t be afraid...” Those are the three

points of our triangle.

Our first point, the first command, is “*Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.*” Our natural inclination is to fear anything or anyone that could kill us. Jesus is instead reminding us that there’s more to life than our temporary existence.

This is not just a strange death wish. What or whom we fear controls us. This fact is played out in too many ways to describe them all. Superstitions and curses are a form of controlling fear. Shame, guilt, and loss of face are also controlling fears. Often the threat is not real but only exists in our imagination. We see ourselves walking into a narrow room and feel it closing in on us. Or we see ourselves walking into a crowded arena and imagine everyone staring at us. But even if the threat is real, Jesus says do not fear the one that can only kill you but fear the one that can destroy both body and soul.

Only one can destroy our body and soul in hell, and that one is God. This is the unpopular part of God nowadays. We’d like to ignore hell, ignore His wrath, ignore the righteous judgment of God. After all, God

is love. Yes! He is. But God isn't a teddy bear all soft, cuddly and safe. Neither is this picture of God relegated to the Old Testament; we are after all reading Jesus' own words. Or consider this verse from the book of Hebrews: "*It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*" (Hebrews 10:31, NIV).

There is a complexity to our relationship with God that we ignore at our own peril. Jesus is both our best friend and the righteous judge. God is our Father but is also just, right, and holy in His discipline. The Holy Spirit empowers and directs but can also be grieved by our decisions.

When we remove the fear of God from our faith, our triangulation fails. We miss the destination of Jesus' three-part command.

Jesus didn't leave us with a view of God that is only looking forward to punishing sinners. In fact, the view Jesus left is something far different. "*Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more*

than many sparrows.”

God’s valuation of us is not based on what we do or don’t do, but on the inherent value of simply being. God knows the very hairs on our head. He knows everything about us—the shame we bear, the hidden sin that holds us in bondage, the guilt and regrets we hide from everyone. God knows all of that and highly values us anyway. How do I know that? *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life”* (John 3:16, NIV).

When we triangulate using these three points, we arrive at something wonderful. We discover a different kind of fear—not a controlling fear that uses punishment to drive our behavior but a loving fear of a Father’s heart that disciplines to move toward Himself. Yes, fear God. Recognize His awesome holiness and power in which sin cannot stand. Fear Him above everything and everyone else. But recognize and understand that it is not a controlling fear but a fear leading us to His love.

We often judge God’s love for us (or how well we are following Him) by false external measures. If our

business and finances thrive, then God is on our side. If our children are quietly obedient, if our job is rewarding, if our life is peaceful, He's on our side. These examples (and many others) are all false weights that lie about God's true feelings. Neither poverty nor wealth is a sign of God's punishment or blessing. The poor are just as valued by God as the rich, if not more so. The way of God's kingdom is not like the way of the world. This doesn't mean that God wants or wills anyone to be poor; what God wants above everything else is that you know Him, and He knows you.

The choice of whom to fear is left to us. We can choose to obey or to ignore these commands. Of course, we ignore them at our own peril. God is love, but we must choose to receive it, to grow in it, to walk in it, to be molded by it, and to live our lives according to it. We can either take God's love as it is offered or refuse the gift. The choice is yours. Jesus says, "Don't...do...and don't be afraid."

Jesus Says, “Talk to Them”

For our next “Jesus Says” command, we need a kind of wrapper—like fences that keep us from straying too far off course. The first fence is scope; this command is specific to our brothers and sisters in Christ and not necessarily toward the world. Or as Jesus put it: *the tax collectors and sinners*. The second fence for this chapter is holding onto generalities lest we write a book of law. Each locality must develop its own norms for this command. And what is the “Jesus Says” command that requires these fences?

“If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector (Matthew 18:15–17, NIV).

For me anyway, this is one of the hardest commands since I hate confrontation, although I will add that the perspective of years has given me an appreciation for it. I even define a true friend as one who will tell me my faults. I call this “the mustard on the shirt test of friendship.”

Around this command are some other fences. Nearby is Jesus’ explanation of forgiveness and the parable of the unmerciful servant. Forgiveness is a key attitude needed to follow this command. Further off but still in view is Jesus’ colorful picture of helping a brother with a piece of sawdust in his eye while we have a log in our own. Before we walk out this command, we must first deal with our own sin, our own offense, and our own unforgiveness.

We must also recognize the difference between sins. Some sin, such as, but not limited to, murder, adultery, stealing, etc., is sin for all. But some sins are a matter of conscience and conviction. The gray areas we often fight over.

Say that I’m convicted of the Holy Spirit that eating blue M & M’s candy is a sin for me. I could have any number of reasons why which is not

important now. The wrong headed kink is when I put that conviction about blue M & M's on everyone else. Been there, done that, bought the t-shirt, took a picture, and fell flat on my face. We must avoid putting a personal conviction on someone else.

Before implementing Jesus' command, we must ask the Holy Spirit for guidance. Sometimes we see things in others that God is wanting to change in us first. Sometimes we're reflecting our own internal guilt. Sometimes we do not see the whole picture. Sometimes they really do have mustard on their shirt.

Our attitude in this matter makes a huge difference. Are we addressing this from a place of offense, desiring that they understand our pain more than desiring their change of heart? Are we confronting from a place of judgment, seeing ourselves as the perfect and holy one charged with fixing everyone else? Or are we speaking and listening with an attitude of love, forgiveness, grace, and mercy? Judgmental attitudes and angry words may reign in someone's behavior, but only love and mercy will lead to a change of heart, repentance, and forgiveness.

Jesus provides two possible outcomes. The desired outcome is that the person turns and repents. The second outcome is best described as a changed relationship. The many nuances and variables to the second make it impossible to encapsulate. Jesus said to treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector. So, how did Jesus treat Gentiles, tax collectors, and sinners? That's the key which must be applied in this lesson. He maintained an open door toward them and ate at their table.

Before closing this command, a few points must be addressed. Confrontation is so painful at times that we employ other means to get our point out, but that is not following Jesus' command. Jesus didn't say to post the sin in the public square—or on Facebook and other social media sites. Jesus didn't say to run to the court and file a lawsuit. Jesus didn't say to shrug it off and ignore it either. Jesus didn't say to utter it as a prayer request (evangelical gossip) before the congregation or small group or via any other form of gossip. Jesus gave us a specific path that begins with talking to the person—one on one in private. What a novel concept!

Let's recap. Pray first. Examine our own hearts. Forgive. Go with a desire to see repentance and a changed heart instead of just changed behavior. Follow Jesus' prescribed path. There are many more pieces to this which must be worked out locally. Here's the thing to remember: this is not a *suggestion*; this is a *command*. Jesus says, "Go to your brother or sister."

Jesus Says, “Rest”

Kerry Rohman

My daughter Ava turned six years old this week. The main event of her unicorn-themed birthday party was a combination bounce house and waterslide. My husband Jake and I played referee to over twenty kids who were bouncing and going down the slide. To help prevent any emergency-room visits, we formed lines and allowed only five or six eager kids in at a time. Well, I am happy to say that during the three-hour party, we suffered only one bloody nose and tons of fun. I would not describe the party as “restful”! After the last table was put away, I was more than ready to elevate my feet and relax.

If you ask someone “How are you doing?” it’s not uncommon to hear something like “busy, but good.” Rarely do we hear “rested.” Is saying *rested* simply an awkward answer or is our society having a difficult time finding rest?

I read a Christian book a few years ago about busyness. My reading that book was a turning point for me in praying and obeying how the Lord wants

me to use my time. This managing of my time includes when to come back to a place of rest and refreshment. Many people can say “yes” to where Jesus is calling them to go, but I truly believe there are fewer individuals who can say “no” to where He is not sending us (which often leaves us more depleted). The book provided a biblical example of Jesus’ resting with His Father.

In Mark 1:21-39, the whole town gathered at the door where Jesus was staying. This looks like a great opportunity for Jesus to share the love of God and to offer healing. However, the next day He went to spend time with His Father and then left for another town where God was calling Him to go. He left in spite of people’s wanting Him to stay.

Nowhere in the Bible does the Lord encourage excessive busyness; rather, verses on rest are spotlighted, such as Matthew 11:28-30. Jesus says,

“Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is

light.”

The Message version says, “*Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest...*” (Matthew 11:28-30, MSG).

I must confess, I once thought that *resting* meant “being lazy or unproductive,” or that I needed to use all my time to sacrifice myself. But I became stressed and burnt out easily. I wanted to sleep as soon as I arrived home and dreaded waking up because of my mile-long “to-do” list. *There are not enough hours in the day to get everything done*, I thought, and I was also short-fused with those closest to me. I had a problem, and that dilemma was not getting filled back up. Rather, I was staying in a place of emptiness.

With the help of the Holy Spirit, trusted mentors, and some good resources, I learned how to set healthier boundaries. I learned how to exercise my “no” muscle. I discovered how to rest in the Lord’s presence in many ways according to His leading.

I even started finding rest in everyday activities, if they were not out of balance with the Lord’s will. In

doing so, I experienced a peace and a connection to God and others that I had never experienced before.

God does encourage working hard, so I am not advocating being a couch potato every day, all day. However, there is a difference between working hard at what you've been called to do vs. a restless busy lifestyle. Just as the kids at Ava's birthday party sometimes were bouncing, and sometimes had to "rest" in line, I am continually learning how to balance out life and rest.

My prayer for you and myself is that we run after intimacy with Jesus, tuning down noises/distractions in our own lives to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit. Just as in Matthew 8:23-27, Jesus was asleep during a storm, we can be in a place of peace—no matter what is going on around us. That we soak in the presence of God and go to Jesus frequently, which is paramount to finding rest and tranquility. As Psalm 46:10 (NIV) says, "*Be still, and know that I am God,*" Jesus says, "Rest."

Jesus Says, “Give to God What Is God’s”

One day the power players of the day set out to trap Jesus. They cleverly devised a question that could be only answered in a way that would either paint Jesus as a rebel or a Roman sympathizer. The question was preceded with flattery and puffed-up praise. *“Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?”* they cunningly asked. But Jesus was no one’s fool and saw through their camouflage of praise. In Jesus’ answer is found the next “Jesus-Says” command:

But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?” “Caesar’s,” they replied. Then he said to them, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s” (Matthew 22:15–22, NIV).

The wisdom on display in Jesus’ answer is blindingly brilliant. He trapped the power players with their own

trap instead. Sometimes we're so awed by the answer that we fail to see that His command applies to us as well.

Of course, this command contains two parts. The first answers the underlying question of the power players about paying taxes to a despotic, world-hungry, oppressive government. To that Jesus says to give to Caesar what is Caesar's. Even in the best of governments, we can disagree with how our taxes are spent. So, the bottom line here is to pay our taxes.

The second half of Jesus' response should shake the world. According to Genesis, humanity is created in the image of God. In the human experience is a divine spark, a shared moral compass of fairness and compassion, a desire to create, and a bent toward bringing order into chaos. Those are the stamp of God on the clay of humanity. Many, of course, do not live according to this stamp of God. And no one lives according to it all the time. That's the confusing duality of humanity and the life we all experience.

Since we are all stamped with the image of God Jesus says that, like returning to Caesar the coin bearing his image, we must give back to God

ourselves. The act of turning ourselves over to God solves our confusing duality. We stop going our own way. We stop stressing over our own desires. We stop the battles over turf, over pride, over power, and over honor. We release, as one poet phrased it, “our better angels.” We find compassion, express mercy, grant grace, and show love. And maintaining this is a struggle since falling back into the habit of holding back from God is easy.

As we give ourselves to God, we don’t lose ourselves as some would suppose; we gain ourselves. We find the real, meaningful, and purposeful life that God intends for all. But we must be clear; that path toward God is through Jesus who gave Himself for us all. You see, Jesus also rendered unto God what was God’s. Jesus says, “Give to God what is God’s.”

Jesus Says, “Forgive”

Ben Hoerr

Whether or not we grew up attending church, almost all of us are familiar—at least in some measure of detail—with Jesus’ life-changing teachings and memorable parables or stories. Of all the truths Jesus spoke, perhaps none is more challenging and difficult than His instruction to forgive others, especially when we have been deeply hurt or unjustly wronged.

In Bible times, the Jewish rabbis often taught the need to forgive others was limited to three or four offenses—after that, one was entitled to “hold a grudge.” The apostle Peter might have thought his suggestion to Jesus that one should be willing to forgive “seven times” seemed generous. But in his typical re-interpretation of the current understanding of God’s original intent with the ancient Scripture texts, Jesus said we are “to forgive seventy times seven” (a figure of speech for an infinite number of times). And then He told a compelling story that we call The Parable of the Unforgiving Debtor, recorded

in Matthew 18:21-35.

In this story, a king decided to settle accounts with his servants. In the process, one of his debtors who owed millions of dollars—a preposterously large sum of money to the audience—was unable to repay and was consequently subject to being sold into slavery. But the man begged for mercy and more time to repay. Filled with pity, the king forgave his debt.

This same servant left the king's presence, found another servant who owed him an insignificant amount of money and demanded repayment. Even though this second servant could not repay the debt and begged for mercy, the creditor was unwilling to wait, had the man arrested and thrown into debtor's prison.

Several observers were upset by this transaction and reported it to the king. He immediately called in the indebted servant, rebuked him for his unmerciful attitude having been shown mercy, and threw him into prison where he would be tortured until he paid his entire debt. The story concludes with Jesus' sobering words: *“That’s what My Heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers*

and sisters from your heart.”

Jesus is teaching that unforgiveness enslaves, or imprisons, us to bitterness, resentment, anger, even patterns of fear, rejection, loneliness, indecision, or a desire for revenge. He commands us to forgive those who have wronged us. Forgiveness is letting go of the debt we want others to pay! Extending forgiveness is not minimizing or denying the wrong that’s been done or the hurt and pain that we’ve suffered. Nor does forgiveness declare that what the offenders did is now acceptable. Rather, what forgiveness does is to remove the power of that experience and memory over our life.

You see, every wrong, hurt, or injustice against us produces an indebtedness we feel. These debts are something we believe are owed to us, and we internally long to be compensated for this loss. Forgiveness means that we release what we perceive is owed to us, and we let it go. This sets us free to go on with God’s purposes for our lives—to think, feel, and act differently.

I don’t think that Jesus is suggesting this process is easy but possible with the help of His indwelling

Spirit whom He called “the Helper.” The Spirit enables us to do what we cannot do on our own strength, power, or resources. And forgiveness is not so much a destination at which we arrive once for all time as it is a daily walk on a narrow, winding road, paying close attention not to slip into either ditch of bitterness or desire for revenge.

In 2007, a person who did not get the job for which he applied at our former church, inaccurately perceived that I had unilaterally made this decision. Consequently, he systematically went around to various staff, leaders, and the board of directors to smear my character and try to get me fired. The facts were that he was unqualified and inexperienced for the position and that the entire senior staff made the decision. I was especially bitter and angry because he was attacking my integrity and spreading lies. While I wanted him to pay for this debt, nevertheless Jesus said I had to forgive him! Obeying Christ’s directive certainly wasn’t easy, but with God’s grace I was able to forgive him. Subsequently, I experienced a new freedom—like being released from torment!

May the Holy Spirit enable each of us to

experience the freedom Jesus offers by forgiving others for the things we have suffered. Let's ask Jesus right now the first steps we should take in order to *"forgive seventy times seven times!"* Jesus says, "Forgive."

Jesus Says, “Love God”

So far, twenty “Jesus Says” commands found in the Gospels have been addressed. Perhaps some of them have been surprising, some familiar, and more than a few have been challenging. With this chapter, we arrive at the core command—the root from which all other commands flow from and must answer to. This command is both our greatest joy and our largest failure. What is this “Jesus Says” command?

Matthew records a series of questions posed by the power players of the day designed to, in some way, trap Jesus. Lastly, a lawyer posed this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Most of us will already know Jesus’ answer, but pause with me for a moment and consider the question.

The Israelites of Jesus’ day were obsessed with keeping the Law of Moses. Large volumes were written to determine the lines of what was lawful and what wasn’t. Making these determinations was surely the lawyer’s life as he parsed the Law to stay in God’s good graces. But this question begged Jesus to

take sides since the various factions within Israel each had their own answer. The Pharisees would lean toward the jot and tittle, the black and white of the Law. The Sadducees would lean toward humanity and peace. The Zealots would lean toward political purity while the Essenes would seek a different kind of purity. They were all striving to keep the Law, but a law that was colored by their worldview.

We find ourselves in the same kind of world with factions surrounding us—Left, Right, Libertarian, Socialist, Capitalist, Humanist, Harley-Davidsonist (just joking to see if you're still with me). Each of them would answer the lawyer's question about the greatest commandment differently. The same holds true for the variety of churches and often even groups within our churches. When grasping this reality, we can see the brilliant wisdom in Jesus' answer.

In response to the lawyer's question, Jesus replied, "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*" *This is the first and greatest commandment*" (Matthew 22:37-8). Knowing that Jesus quoted the Law (Deuteronomy 6:5) to answer the question is

important. The lawyer wouldn't have accepted it any other way.

Regardless of their faction, Jesus' answer pushed everyone to a whole new level. His response blasted past the traditions, the doctrines, the religious, the sacred, the preferred, the disliked, and even pushed past the Law itself. An answer that spanned two verses upset the paradigm of do's and don'ts and entered the realm of being and relationship.

Think about it. The greatest law, the greatest commandment, the greatest action is to love God with everything we are. That's it. If what we are thinking, feeling, saying, and doing doesn't come from loving God, then we are failing. This is truly our greatest challenge and our greatest failure. The Pharisees were expert law keepers, and they failed. The Sadducees were expert humanitarians and peacemakers, but they failed. The Zealots were politically pure, and they failed. The Essenes were morally pure, and they failed. Only one motivation of many fulfills the Law, and that is the motivation of loving God first and foremost above everything and everyone else.

Jesus' command is also our greatest joy. We are

freed from the shackles of “have to” and run in the sunlight of “want to.” The command is to love—*agapé* love, a giving kind of sacrificial love. Jesus’ kind of love for us is open, honest, giving, no strings attached, no expectation of return, no demands, just utter love.

Think of it this way: if God never answered another prayer, would you still love Him? If your world fell apart financially, relationally, and in your health like Job’s did, would you still love God? If our answer is yes (or at least an “I hope so”) to those hard questions, then God is our joy and keeping the commandment to love God with everything we are is not burdensome but lifting.

To be honest, keeping this “Jesus Says” command to love God changes everything. It changes the way we pray, read our Bible, do church, and relate to the world around us. It challenges us and frees us at the same time in everything we think, feel, say, and do. Jesus says love God with all that we are.

Jesus Says, “Love Others”

In the previous “Jesus Says” command, the overarching command to love God with everything we are was explored. This command, which is found in Matthew 22:37-38, is Jesus’ response to a lawyer’s question: “*Which is the great commandment in the Law?*” Jesus answered, “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind*” (Matthew 22:37, NIV). This answer fulfilled the lawyer’s question, but Jesus didn’t stop there.

Jesus continued in the very next verse, “*And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments*” (Matthew 22:39–40, NIV). It must have been world-shattering to hear the entirety of Jewish Law distilled into two commandments. And if we give this verse just a little thought, it will be world-shattering for us as well.

What does it mean to “*love your neighbor as yourself*”? Those few words tumble out easily enough, but we need to soak in them for a bit. The

kind of love expressed here is defined as “to have a warm regard for and interest in another” (BDAG). Think of it in the terms of valuing and cherishing.

We all value and cherish ourselves. Some would say too much. That narcissistic personalities values themselves is rather obvious; the problem is that they value no one else (or only a select few). Even those struggling with depression and suicidal thoughts value themselves. Something which may not be obvious but is there, nonetheless. I’m not a clinical psychologist, but my observation is that depression often seems to have an edge of not being valued or wanted by others. We all value and cherish ourselves although it may be expressed in wildly different ways.

As we cherish and value ourselves, Jesus says we are to love, value, and cherish our neighbors. We must be careful here to remember Jesus’ answer to the question “*Who is my neighbor?*” which He illustrated with the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37). Our neighbors are not limited to the folks in our apartment building or the house next door

or those who live in our neck of the woods. Our neighbors include everyone we encounter, even for a moment.

Our neighbors are the clerks at the store, the drivers on the highway, our co-workers, the homeless we tend to walk around, the obnoxious jerk two rows down at the game, as well as our family and friends. When our lives intersect with someone else, then that person is our neighbor. Even right now as you read this book, our lives are intersecting—even though you and I may be half a world away.

But we must remember something important. Loving others as we love ourselves is not done in a vacuum apart from God. That would be worshiping at the idol of humanity. Humanity's love is so nebulous as to be undefinable. Is love sexual? Is it self-serving? Is it just brain chemistry? Is it only for a few? Is it romantic? Is it only a fleeting feeling? The truth is we don't know what real love is apart from God. The Bible says, "*We love because he first loved us*" (1 John 4:19, NIV). We cannot fully follow or obey Jesus' second commandment to love our neighbor without following His first commandment to love

God.

The logical next step in this chapter is to describe ways to love others, but that would be an impossible task. Actions do not define love, but love decides our actions. I cannot say that love is giving candy to a child because it may or may not be true at that moment. Neither can I say that a certain action is always loving or that another action is never loving (although devaluing anyone in any way is always unloving). I can't tell you how to love your neighbor, only God can. That fact doesn't let us off the hook but forces us to prayerfully consider how to intentionally love others. Jesus says, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus Says, “Remember Me”

One morning I sat beside a rocky stream just outside of Yellowstone National Park. I love these alone moments with God. Especially when they are in different surroundings. The morning was mountain air cool with just a hint of haze. My creature comforts were simple, a Bible, a large cup of coffee, and a granola bar. While I sat on a water-bleached tree trunk I read, prayed, listened, and unexpectedly wandered into our next “Jesus Says” command.

Based on what I’d been reading that morning I felt I should do communion as an act of obedient worship. Now I don’t carry around a ready to go set of bread and juice. All I had with me was coffee and a granola bar. So, while praying for the Lord’s grace I used those instead. I can’t say that some huge revelation came, or that some great weight was lifted. All I know is that partaking of the Lord’s Supper in that way seemed good the Holy Spirit.

Communion or the Lord’s Supper is recorded in all four Gospels. Luke records it this way:

“And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it,

and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you'' (Luke 22:19–20, NIV).

When we combine the Gospel accounts, we find three imperative commands:

“Take and eat” (Matthew 26:26-27).

“Drink” (Matthew 26:26-27).

“Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:10-20).

At this point, we must recognize the grand diversity of thought and practice concerning Communion, keeping in mind the purpose of this article is not to pronounce judgment on any of those. But I am sadly amazed that Christ followers have divided over something that was intended to draw us together into a common faith. This issue will not be corrected in these few words.

Communion, however, is more than just one of the many ways we worship God. We are commanded

by Jesus to remember, to reflect upon, to recall again His sacrifice of love that opened the way to the Father. In its simplicity, we are remembering and cherishing Christ's body that was broken for us and His blood that was shed for us. Communion reminds us that the fellowship, love, and grace of God is freely given but dearly bought. In it we are reminded that we don't approach God based on our good deeds, our gold, or our purity but by the broken body and shed blood of Jesus. This one act of worship reminds us of that world-shaking, life-changing truth.

Whether we are in a church building surrounded by others embracing the journey of following Christ or alone beside a mountain stream with improvised bread and juice, we can remember Jesus' sacrifice for us in a physical, tangible, and real way. In that moment of remembrance, we center our faith, push aside all the "have to" of religion, and return to that one monumental truth that binds Jesus' followers together. *"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us"* (Romans 5:8, NIV). Jesus Says, "Remember Me."

Jesus Says, “Keep Watching and Praying”

I think the best metaphor for this next “Jesus Says” command is something many of us do on a regular basis—drive our vehicle. Driving requires alertness. We are constantly warned about the dangers of distracted driving, and none of us would think of taking a nap while navigating the highway. Those same warnings and habits and alertness also apply to our walk with Jesus.

Shortly after the events of the Upper Room, Jesus brought the disciples to a park-like garden near Jerusalem to pray, knowing that the hour of His arrest was near. Taking Peter, James, and John aside, Jesus said, *“My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me”* (Matthew 26:38, NIV). Jesus then went a little way from them and prayed for about an hour. When He returned, the disciples were sleeping. *“Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?” he asked Peter. “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak”* (Matthew 26:40–41, NIV).

The commands in these verses are “watch” and “pray”; or more accurately, *keep* watching and praying. While this is immediately directed at Peter and the other disciples, this command has echoes in the letters of Paul and Peter. Consider, “*And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people*” (Ephesians 6:18, NIV). And, “*Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour*” (1 Peter 5:8, NIV).

So, how does driving a car relate to “watch and pray”? When we drive, we must be aware of many things, including our location, how fast we are going, what obstacles are in the road, and so forth. Driving also includes an awareness of the expected and unexpected dangers around us, such as the warning lights and gauges of our car, how much fuel we have, and the various safety and comfort settings at our fingertips. This situational awareness is the hallmark of a good driver. When a driver fails at these, we often call him a “distracted driver.”

Our path of life and our walk with Jesus requires

the same level of alertness. We need to be aware of where we are and the risks of the road we're on. We should evaluate what in our life distracts us from fully following Jesus. We must be ready for the unexpected temptation, challenge, or struggle that may cross our path. We must also look inside. What are the warning lights of our emotions saying about our spiritual health? How full or empty is our heart with the joy of the Holy Spirit?

As I've noted before, all metaphors break down at some point, and so does this one. While driving is a relatively solo act with only one steering wheel available, our walk of faith is connected to community. We are to watch and pray for ourselves and for each other. I need my sisters and brothers in Christ to warn me of the dangers I can't see, to encourage when the path is difficult, to cover when my faith becomes distracted, and to remind me to fill my tank by connecting with God on a regular basis. And likewise, they need me to do the same for them. Jesus says, "Keep watching and praying."

Jesus Says, “Proclaim the Good News”

Christians tend to elevate some of Jesus’ commands, but we hide others in a box. We don’t necessarily throw them away as we know better than that, but we do push them into a corner. Maybe they don’t seem to apply to us. *Surely Jesus didn’t mean for me to do that. It must have only been for the twelve apostles or the folks who immediately heard it.* The next “Jesus Says” command has either been pushed in the corner or elevated as an idol. Jesus said,

“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well” (Mark 16:15–18, NIV).

The command is the word *preach*. Understanding

that the “go” is expected is important, and like the Great Commission in Matthew 28, “go” could be rendered “while you are going.” To preach seems to have a dirty connotation nowadays—unless it is those few minutes set aside on a Sunday morning. Strangely enough, we hear *preaching*, as the word is intended, all day long. Every form of media is in some ways “preaching” or “proclaiming and urging acceptance of a truth”—whether that preaching pertains to the current news of the day or an advertisement for the best hemorrhoid cream to buy.

As recorded in Mark’s gospel, Jesus uses the inclusive word “*all*” twice. Go to *all* the world; preach to *all* creation. Granted, for one person to achieve this feat of being everywhere and speaking to everyone would be impossible. Look at it this way: the command is fully inclusive. We are to extend our reach beyond the limits of comfortability and language and break through the barriers of culture. “*All the world*” includes the unreached in far-off places, the unreached in our city’s uncomfortable pockets of despair and violence, and even the unreached in the cubicle across the hall of our

workplace.

“Proclaim to all creation”; no one is left out—the rich, the poor, the broken, the unworthy, those deemed to be acceptable and desirable along with those seen as unacceptable and undesirable. This message is to be proclaimed to the powerful and the powerless—to all without exception and even to our enemies and those trying to destroy Christ’s message.

Proclaiming the good news is not left up to the few who stand up and preach on Sunday morning; rather, it is something for all of us following Jesus. But notice that Jesus didn’t say *how* to go about making our proclamations. Some will stand in front of groups. Others will leverage technology. A few will literally go across the world. But the most common “preaching” and perhaps the most effective are the quiet one-on-one conversations which focus on a person’s personal needs and struggles.

A word about the verses following Jesus’ command. I included the full text of Jesus’ statement in Mark for a purpose. The command itself is not that much different than the Great Commission. What follows is what makes many super uncomfortable and

pushes these verses into the shadows.

Jesus didn't provide these signs as a kind of litmus test to prove who believes and who doesn't. The command isn't to baptize or to do any of these other things. Too many have sought these other things and failed to fulfill what Jesus' command is: to proclaim the good news to everyone everywhere.

When the good news is proclaimed and believed, the kingdom of God will break through the darkness in tangible ways. People will be forever changed; they will die to their old life and live a new life in Jesus—a change symbolized and solemnized in baptism.

When the kingdom breaks through, God's power will touch others in ways beyond our human abilities, revealing that God is God over all—over the spiritual realm, over languages and communication, over the natural world, and over sickness and disease. We shouldn't elevate or worship these signs, but neither should we hide them in a closet.

The greatest sign, however, is not the screams of demons, the speaking of unknown languages, the sudden ineffectiveness of snake venom, or a

miraculous physical healing. The greatest sign of the good news of Jesus is a reclaimed, restored, redeemed life.

Let's pull back to the main thing. You and I are proclaimers of something every day. We advocate for our desires. We proclaim our likes and dislikes. We let others know about our experiences and struggles. Why does it feel strange for us to talk about the one person who has changed our lives the most? We do need to be wise, we need to build bridges of relationship to carry the message, we need to be winsome and not judgmental, but we also need to be courageous and not hide the light shining in our hearts.

Jesus says preach. Be creative, be real, go to them, connect with others deeper than is comfortable, reveal your own journey, pray for God's wisdom and words, pray also for others to be receptive hearers, be a risk taker, be inclusive, have the patience of a farmer, and be courageous. Jesus says, "Proclaim the good news."

Jesus Says, “Beware of Greed”

On the surface, the next “Jesus Says” command seems limited to only a few. But when we dig a little deeper, think a little broader, and really understand what Jesus is saying, we see that it applies to everyone. Jesus said, *“Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions”* (Luke 12:15, NIV).

This statement was Jesus’ response to a man who wanted Jesus to order his brother to share the inheritance. Jesus responded by stating He wasn’t the judge or arbiter between himself and his brother. Jesus then spoke the previous command and went on to illustrate what He meant with a story that can be summed up as “You can’t take it with you.” Jesus concluded that story, *“This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God”* (Luke 12:21, NIV).

Here’s the shocking part that we may not see. Greed is not limited to the rich; it’s just that the rich may have been more successful at accumulating their wealth. A person with little can be just as greedy as a

person with much.

That concept may sound strange to you—like saying that a person struggling with bulimia is gluttonous. But the truth is that greed is an attitude of the heart, as is gluttony. You see, greed and gluttony are about making our lives center on something other than Jesus. In the case of a scrooge, it is money and possessions; for a glutton, it is food. A rich person may or may not be greedy in the same way that an overweight person may or may not be gluttonous. The bottom line is that both have fallen into the trap of greed. We all fall into the trap of greed in one way or another.

Greed may have several sources, including fear about never having enough, the feeling that possessions somehow validate our existence and value, a desire for power that accompanies having, possessing a competitiveness that is always looking to get ahead, or feeling that possessions are a sign of blessing. But these examples are more than simply sources of greed, we also use them and others like them to justify our greed and feel right about it.

Let me be clear, our bank account is not a sign of

blessing. Neither is having little a sign of God's disfavor. In fact, it can be rightly said that God is closest to the poor, the left out, and those on the fringes.

Greed also takes many forms. Money and possessions are the most obvious. We can also be greedy with our time, our attention, the value we place on ourselves and others, our position or place of authority, and our rights. Just about everything we can put the word "our" or "my" in front of can be an object of greed.

What really matters is whether we are rich toward God. Is He the controlling influence in our lives, as opposed to money, power, sex, leisure, food, or anything. Only God and Him alone. This richness toward God changes how we steward all these things because He is our treasure. Jesus says, "Beware of greed."

Jesus Says, “Invite All”

It so happened that a Pharisee invited Jesus to share a Sabbath meal with him. The invitation was really a subtle trap. Also, attending the meal was a man suffering a from painful and possibly life-threatening swelling. The unspoken question involved whether Jesus would heal this man on the Sabbath—an absolute no-no in the mind of the Pharisees. Jesus revealed their trap, healed the man, and challenged the Pharisee’s assumptions (Luke 14:1-6). But the lessons were not over for this dinner party, which brings us to our next “Jesus Says” command.

As the guests began to take their places, Jesus noticed them jockeying for seats of honor. This led to Jesus’ encouragement to take the lesser place. *“For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted”* (Luke 14:11, NIV).

But Jesus wasn’t finished yet. He then turned to the host and said the following:

“When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your

relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (Luke 14:12–14, NIV).

Jesus’ command is “Invite.” But this invitation is different; it is not weighed by social expectation or a calculated gain. It is instead the way of God’s kingdom.

We could take a narrow view and only apply this word to luncheons or dinner parties. But I think Jesus was showing and telling us something larger—an attitude of heart that displays the true nature of the God’s kingdom.

The events recorded from this Sabbath meal combine to reveal a greater truth. The Pharisee and his guests had a fenced-in view. They lived in a black-and-white world of ins and outs, acceptable and unacceptable. Jesus took a bulldozer and knocked down all their fences.

The needs of people were more important than Sabbath law as they understood it. The competition for the highest seat is unwise and unseemly. The calculated invitations do not work in God's economy. You could boil this down to a simple (but unfortunately politically charged) phrase: everyone matters equally.

Jesus still wasn't finished, however. In Luke 14:16-24, Jesus tells a parable about party invitations, which some rejected or found better things to do. His pointed parable aimed directly at the Pharisees and their rejection of Jesus' message of the kingdom. The parable ends with the following directive:

“Then the master told his servant, ‘Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet’” (Luke 14:23–24, NIV).

Jesus' command is to invite *all* into God's loving kingdom, knowing some will reject it. Our job is to determine who is *ready*—not who is *worthy*. We need to see who is *needy*—not who would benefit us the

most. This command calls us to search for the broken—not just those who are “low-maintenance.” To fulfill this command, we must break through the human-imposed barriers of class, culture, tribe, and race. The invitation, God’s invitation, is extended to all. You could say that we are simply the messengers of that good news. Jesus says, “Invite all.”

Jesus Says, “Love Each Other”

To be honest, we could have skipped most of the “Jesus Says” commands and gone straight to this one. The simple fact is this: most of the previous commands are found in this one command. But exploring all the “Jesus Says” statements inform our understanding of this command. Jesus said, “*This is my command: Love each other*” (John 15:17, NIV).

Jesus spoke this command three times in John’s gospel. “*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another*” (John 13:34, NIV). And, “*My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you*” (John 15:12, NIV). Finally, “*This is my command: Love each other*” (John 15:17, NIV) I think Jesus really means it, what about you?

Jesus describes the kind of love He has in mind by saying, “*Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends*” (John 15:13, NIV). In the previous commands, there is some sense of laying down our lives for another by setting aside our rights, our desires, our wants, our likes, our energy,

our resources, and our time for the sake of someone else. It is a tall order loaded with risk. We may lose out, lessen in some way, or even be rejected and hated.

Also, notice that Jesus didn't provide any exceptions. There isn't a "but-if" escape clause or "only-if" limitations. Neither are there any expiration dates or mention of how many failures, offenses, or sins it takes to nullify this command. This "Jesus Says" command is powerful in its simplicity: love each other.

Some may argue about the scope of this command and the meaning of "each other." Is the scope limited to loving only our sisters and brothers in Christ or the whole world? But think about this for a moment. Jesus said to love each other in the same way that He loves. That's the standard. We all know (or should know) John 3:16, which says, "*For God so loved the world...*" Jesus did not demonstrate an example of a limited or fenced-in love, but of a love that extends to all. Jesus' love even extended to us before we knew Him.

Jesus' command is to love each other in our

similarities and our differences. He wanted us to love each other regardless of anything humankind uses to distinguish, separate, or discriminate from one other. This love is not a gushy-make-you-feel-good-no-matter-what kind of love but a kind of love that wants the best for each other. This kind of love accepts all but also says the hard things when needed. This love is freely given without any strings or expectations of return. After all, love is not an *investment*, but a wonderful, beautiful, and costly *gift*.

Some will look at this chapter and say, “Dale’s gone off his rocker.” Their mind is already filled with folks they know should be excluded from this command, perhaps even quoting Scriptures of wrath, judgment, and exclusion. However, they forget that Paul concluded one such list with, “*such were some of you*” (1 Corinthians 6:11b). I’m not saying that everyone is saved, but that Jesus followers are carriers of God’s love in which everyone desires to enter. Because of God’s love, I choose to trust the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of people who are sinful, wounded, bitter, different, self-centered, wrong-headed, and stubborn—in other words, people

just like me and you. Jesus says, “Love each other.”

Jesus Says, “Make Disciples”

We end our exploration of Jesus’ commands where we began. We started with Jesus’ final command often called the “Great Commission.” In that first chapter, we examined the command to make disciples, not in the sense of force but in the sense of inviting others to follow Jesus. But in that first look, we ended with a question: what are the commands Jesus is instructing His followers to obey and teach? That question launched this journey called “Jesus Says.”

To refresh our memory, Jesus said the following:

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:19–20, NIV).

The simplest way to phrase what Jesus is meaning by the phrase *“everything I have commanded you”* is His command is to love God with everything we are

and to love each other. Those two commands encompass everything else. So, while the journey wasn't framed that way, our exploration of Jesus' commands also revealed and demonstrated what it really means to love God and love others.

One final warning: Jesus' command is not about making disciples in our own image but leading folks toward Christlikeness. They are not our disciples at all but Jesus'. In some ways, we cannot help but inject some of ourselves, but we blunt those impurities by always steering folks to Jesus and asking the Holy Spirit to continue His work in us and them.

One final encouragement: Everyone who follows Jesus is invited to the work of making disciples. It is not limited to the "professionals," although they may be more gifted at it and have a greater number under their care. All of us who follow Jesus can in some way encourage and inspire others to love God, love others, and follow Jesus. The ways we do this work are innumerable. Only a few will stand in front of the crowd to teach, but all can pray, care, and walk beside someone else in his or her struggle.

So often we see the job of following Christ as garbage collectors, i.e., exposing and removing sin from the world—as if we believers are the pure ones trying to clean up the world and demand others to stop littering. Yes, light will expose darkness, but what is the light except for the love of God? One of the many jobs of the Holy Spirit is to convict the world of sin. Jesus' blood cleanses the world of sin. Our job is to love God and love each other.

To be honest, being a garbage collector is much easier than being a beacon of God's love. Making disciples after our image is easier than pointing them to Jesus. Loving God and loving others is risky, demanding, and dangerous work, requiring openness, an ear to hear the Holy Spirit and the hearts of others, transparency, and a willingness to lose everything. Giving all is how we make disciples and teach them to observe all that Jesus has commanded. Jesus says...

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