

WWJD: Truth, Love, Action

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We must begin with love.

When a Jewish authority asked Jesus what was the greatest commandment, he replied that the first was to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. He added that the second greatest commandment follows close on the heels of the first: To love your neighbor as yourself. No other commandment comes near these two; rather, these two encompass the rest of the original 10 commandments. (Mark 12:28-34) Yet what does it mean to love?

Love, today, is a word too easily and blithely bandied about. It's ubiquitous on our bumper stickers: I ❤️ the Spartans (Colts, Cubs, Seahawks, name your team) or I ❤️ dogs or I "heart" Ford trucks.

We use the word love to express our enthusiasm for things that have no spirit or that don't care beans if we exist. For instance: "I love your red shoes. So cute!"; "I love the way he sings." "I love Brad Cooper!"

It's tossed out easily in communications: "Love you, bye!"

It's used to coerce and manipulate in advertising: "If you really love your wife, you'll prove it by buying her this fabulous diamond tennis bracelet (which you can't afford and will be paying off for the next five years)." Commercialism requires we show love for our spouses, children and parents through material gifts.

Love is abundantly professed by teenagers to their first, second, third crushes . . . kids who hardly know who they are, or often can't possibly know what love is because it has not been properly demonstrated to them in the home (or church, for that matter).

"I love" has become an easy commonplace phrase. It has been kidnapped, misappropriated, misused so much that it has lost its true meaning and thus its power. The truth is that love is hard. Love is darn hard. Sometimes love seems down right impossible.

Now that first commandment-- to love God--seems easy enough. After all, God loves us, blesses us, takes care of us, gave his son to die for us, saves us, forgives us. What's not to love about God, right?

But that 2nd commandment? Love: The Sequel; Love 2.0? Sure, I can love the nice people, the ones who love me back, my family and best friends. Even though sometimes we annoy one another or minor squabbles occur, we always work it out. But the rest of them? That guy who runs his leaf blower starting at 8 a.m. on a Sat. morning and doesn't stop until late afternoon? That co-worker who thinks she knows more than the rest of us in the office? The church elder who complains about any changes we want to make? The Democrats? The Republicans? The Muslims? The illegals? The "Christians" that don't believe the same things we do? Surely Jesus didn't mean them!

Yet what do we find in that great sermon on the mount but a command to not just love God and those that love us back, but also to love our enemy and pray for them! God, you've got to be kidding!

What is love anyway?

We have a huge problem today: due to the overuse and misuse of the word "love," we don't really know what it means anymore. We think love is fluffy and heart-pounding and mushy and exciting. We rely heavily on our feelings; love is considered a feeling.

However, the truth is that love is an amalgamation of deliberate actions. 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 spells it out for us: Love is [being] patient, love is [being] kind. I insert the verb “being” because love cannot be passive; it can’t be patient or kind without acting. Love does not envy, it does not boast, it isn’t proud. It does not act or speak rudely, it doesn’t look out only for itself, it does not get angry easily, it does not keep a running score of offenses against itself. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. I take that to mean that it doesn’t quit, it doesn’t give up. Or as the current bumper sticker proclaims: Love wins! Verse 13 then emphatically declares: Three remain: faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love. (NIV)

So when I encounter distasteful people, I must still act patiently and kindly, pray for them, and have hope. When I am confronted by my enemy, my greatest weapon is love. Not anger, not revenge, not bitterness, and certainly not threatening death, but LOVE. Love that is humble and truth-seeking and compassionate and long-lasting.

God, love and truth

I like the author’s introduction to the epistles of John in “The Message” Bible. He writes: “The two most difficult things to get straight in life are love and God. More often than not, the mess people make of their lives can be traced to failure or stupidity or meanness in one or both of these areas. The basic and biblical Christian conviction is that the two subjects [God and love] are intricately related. If we want to deal with God the right way, we have to learn to love the right way. If we want to love the right way, we have to deal with God the right way. God and love can’t be separated . . . But there are always people around who don’t want to be pinned down to the God Jesus reveals, to the love Jesus reveals. They want to make up their own idea of God and make up their own style of love.”

In the Church of God of the Abrahamic Faith and here at this conference, as well as amongst all other like-minded believers, I think we have the God part right, but do we have the love part down? I have experienced and know hundreds of Christians who don’t agree with us about who God is, but do their best to love God and to love one another immensely. I believe it is possible to have a wrong understanding of who God is yet still follow his commandments and love others. On the other hand, I have also experienced and know “Christians” with all the correct knowledge of who God is yet are arrogant, impatient and rude. It is possible to have Truth but still be unloving. So is one better than the other? Does Truth without love trump love with flawed understanding?

The epistles of John instruct us in God, Jesus, truth and love:

1 John 2:3, 5, 6: We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands . . . But if anyone obeys his word, God’s love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.

1 John 3:16-19: This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth.

WWJD?

John exhorted the brethren to “walk as Jesus did,” so just what did Jesus say and do? What is it that we are to imitate? Another catch phrase that became ubiquitous in our society and culture in the last 20 years has been: WWJD or What Would Jesus Do? Although it has been overused, stamped on t-shirts, and engraved on bracelets, I think it is a good phrase for prompting thought and action.

We know that Jesus continually proclaimed the good news of the Kingdom of God. A kingdom is a government; a government involves rules. We are told that as believers in Jesus we have been transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. If the world is the kingdom of darkness with all the rules of the world, then what would be the rules of the kingdom of light?

In one of Jesus' greatest sermons, he fleshed out the true meaning of the Ten Commandments which can all be summed up in the two commandments already mentioned earlier: to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. He began to take each commandment and reveal the real heart of God in each matter, sometimes turning things upside down. But isn't that the way opposites should be? The opposite of dark is light. The opposite of hate is love.

Matt. 5: 27: You have heard it said to not commit adultery, but I tell you that if you even look at a woman lustfully you've already committed adultery in your heart.

Matt. 6:33: You've heard it said to keep your oaths, but I tell you to not make oaths at all, but just be honest in your words.

In every situation I can ask myself: What would Jesus do? Would Jesus purposely lie to the boss about why he was late or absent to work on a day? I mean, who will know? Would Jesus take advantage of others' weaknesses in order to cheat them or to gain power over them? Just because he can? Would Jesus yell at his children or cheat on his wife? Would Jesus abuse his body by overeating, drinking in excess, smoking, or over-medicating?

Some of these things we might laugh at or think that the answers are obvious or that we would never do such a thing. However, these are real scenarios in life and Christians find themselves in these positions as much as anyone else. We make daily choices for good or evil, that reflect God or don't.

These are matters of integrity. Jesus is saying you can't just keep doing things the same old way. It isn't working. Hearts aren't changing. In John 13:35 Jesus says that we prove we love God by obeying his commandments and that we prove it to the world by our love for one another. So if I want to get back at someone who has hurt me, WWJD? What Would Jesus Do? What would show love? Back to 1 Cor. 13: what would be the patient, kind, humble thing to do?

Loving brethren and enemies

During a perusal of the topics that have been covered here in the past 25 years of this theological conference, I saw that the issue of pacifism/non-violence has been touched three or four other times, by eloquent speakers much more erudite than I am, and who attached lengthy bibliographies to their presentation. I have only read a few books on the issue long ago, and I chose not to read any of the previous presentations prior to writing up this one, because I want to share what I glean just from reading the scriptures alone and the process of thinking through to my own stance.

I noticed that the topic that seems to make up a majority of Jesus' discourse on the mount is that of love in action. In Matt. 5, Jesus says: 21 "You have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not commit murder' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.' 22 But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell." (NASB) Notice that here Jesus is only talking about our responses to our brethren! To think that this even needs to be said: that we shouldn't hate, be angry at, or curse our brothers and sisters in the Lord, let alone kill them.

Later on, Jesus extended the command to even love those who are not our Christian brothers and sisters, including . . . our enemies! He said: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 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." (MT 5:43-45b)

When you look around at the world today, do you see much love going on towards enemies? If you check FB, Twitter, Instagram or whatever, do you see postings calling people to love evil-doers? Let me get even more personal. If you check what Christians are saying about Muslims, Obama or Trump, undocumented immigrants, people that think, act, look, speak, dress differently than they do, do you see abundant love going on? I have had to block dear Christian friends who spread all kinds of bad press and name-calling about "the other." The reactions of otherwise fine, godly, compassionate people towards the race or political party or ethnicity or belief system that they don't like distresses me greatly. And I have to believe that it distresses God too. If our actions and words are to reflect the love of God and his

son, then we are giving out a very poor picture to the world. In fact, if we do not love our enemies, Jesus said, we can't even consider ourselves to be sons and daughters of God. (Refer back to v. 45.)

We have got to leave the actions of evil-doers in the hands of God. Verses 45-48 continue: "For He (the Father) causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on [both] the righteous and the unrighteous." God is trying to win people over through loving them and blessing them, even while they are cursing him and denying him. "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles [unbelievers] do the same?" How are Christians any better than the non-Christians if they only love the "good" people, the ones on their side? Big whoop-de-do! No, we're called to be BETTER than that. We are to "be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." How do you stand out from the crowd if you're in there screaming as loud as everybody else that Trump is not your president or that we should bomb the Syrians or we should kick out immigrants or whatever else you don't like?

Sidebar: politics and elections.

First of all, I see nothing godly about our current political system, nor do I see many truly godly politicians. The whole system is designed for compromise, for bending principles, for bribery, etc. Second of all, you can't legislate morality; you can't change people's hearts through rules and regulations. The results of trying to religiously follow laws has already been proved disastrous when we look in the Old Testament. Third, Christians involved in politics never look good. We seem to make fools of ourselves or turn off more people than we convince. Finally, voting for the "lesser of two evils" is still voting for evil. Voting for Trump to prevent Hillary from getting into office, you still get Trump and all of his policies. I have long felt that Christians don't really trust God as much as they vocally profess that they do, at least not in the area of politics/government.

I believe there is a very insidious worship of the State in many Christian circles today. People, professing to know God, to be lovers of Jesus, clamor for "Christian" laws to be enacted. The State simply is not going to do that because the worldly State is not God-fearing. Yet these Christians continue to lobby for the government to defend us, to take revenge, to wreak justice. Where is the reliance on the supreme Creator? Where is our trust in the God we say we believe in? Where is the allegiance instead to the rules of the Kingdom of God, the new government to which you now belong when you were transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light?

We have not taken to heart that we are to be rulers, administrators, in the new kingdom that Jesus will establish. How will we rule others if we don't know or follow the rules ourselves? Again, we must ask ourselves: WWJD: What Would Jesus Do? A new government means new rules. A government of God means God's rules. We are supposed to live now what we are going to live later. If we don't live any differently than the world, how is the world expected to know that we are Christians? If God's power hasn't transformed us, why should the world want to know our God?

Now back to the point about loving our enemies . . .

Hate, violence, murder, war

We seem to be in agreement with God about adultery, lying, theft, pride, jealousy, and more. I mostly hear Christians assenting that these are sins. I am endlessly shocked, however, that there is one area in which the Church continues to have no qualms about compromising. It goes hand-in-hand with the aforementioned worship of the State. The Church preaches to love our enemies at the same time it calls on the State for retribution. We hug our brothers and sisters on Sunday, and cry out for vengeance on Monday. We send our children off to the armed services with a Bible in their hands, then when they're called to fight on the front lines or to aim missiles at the other side, we pray for their safety. Do we expect that God loves our children more than he loves the children of the enemy? Does God care about who is killing whom, or does he care about killing period? Acts 10:34-35 says: "Then Peter began to speak: 'I now truly understand that God does not show favoritism, but welcomes those from every nation who fear Him and do what is right.'" We welcome home those who have served in the armed forces, those who have participated in killing others, and we celebrate them in our congregations, calling them hometown heroes.

Please understand what I am saying from God's point of view. Before becoming defensive because our grandparents, parents, brothers, sisters, or even we ourselves served in the armed forces, look at Jesus' words. I am not intending to disrespect our veterans. I am not here to judge the decisions of others already past. I am not particularly patriotic, yet I am grateful to have been born in and to live in the United States of America. I thank God, though, not veterans, for my freedom. Jesus sets us free. When Christians honor the flag, the military, the nation more than they honor God, that is idolatry. The scripture says: "IF my people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land." (2 Chron. 7:14) As citizens of the Kingdom of God, future rulers in God's kingdom, our true allegiance is to God only. I am speaking to you now and to our future: we must love others and we must teach our children to love as Jesus loved, to the point of laying down our lives, not holding on to them, not fighting, not killing.

Consider these thoughts:

1) There are Christians in our military. There are undoubtedly Christians on the opposing side, whether combatants or civilians. So then Christians are killing Christians, their brothers and sisters in Christ. And given that there are Christians on both sides, how is God supposed to choose whom to support? It's a ridiculous question. Is it not extreme arrogance for us to think that God loves America more than He loved Germany or Japan or North Vietnam or North Korea or Iran or Iraq or Syria or Russia or . . . ?

2) I am a believer so I already know I'm saved, and I know my future is secure. But if I kill someone who is not saved, I cut off that person's opportunity to ever hear the good news of eternal life through Jesus Christ. Jesus gave us the commandment to "Go into all the world, preach the gospel, and make disciples of every nation." (MT 28:20) It's impossible to save people and kill them at the same time.

3) We were left with one gigantic directive to make disciples of every nation. The only people who can do that are Christians. The non-believers sure aren't going to do it. This directive from Jesus is so large that we cannot afford to waste time involved in the world's affairs. Some people say that the Christian influence is needed in the military. While that is certainly true, find a way to do it without being part of the system. There will always be plenty of volunteers for the world's armies, but the way of Christ is narrow and few take that path.

4) If the world is supposed to know we are Christians by our love, how does hating, acting violently, wielding a gun, threatening others, dropping bombs, or any other such action honor Jesus, glorify God, or demonstrate love to the unbelievers? Do we only love if it's convenient for us? And by the way, how incongruous is it to see photos of army tanks with "God bless America" or "I love Jesus" painted on them?

5) Who is the ultimate authority over Christians? Let's just say that your boss were to order you to embezzle all the company funds for him, or else you will lose your job, would you do it? If the Governor or the President of the United States were to order citizens to pick up a weapon, go to their next-door neighbors with whom they've been living in harmony for ten years, and under threat of being thrown in jail, kill those neighbors because they are a perceived threat to the nation, would you do it? I'm presuming the answer is no. Therefore, why do we make excuses and accept a different moral when a worldly government orders us to join a military organization, train to kill, and march off to a different land to determinedly destroy people who are not bothering us? WWJD?

Definition of murder / kill

Some people argue that there is a difference between murder and killing. I have this note from Wikipedia:

"Thou shalt not kill (LXX; οὐ φονεύσεις), You shall not murder (Hebrew: lo tiršah) or You shall not kill (KJV), is a moral imperative included as one of the Ten Commandments in the Torah,[1] specifically Exodus 20:13 and Deuteronomy 5:17. The imperative to not kill is in the context of unlawful killing resulting in bloodguilt.[2]

The Hebrew Bible contains numerous prohibitions against unlawful killing, but also contains prescriptive imperatives for lawful killing in the context of warfare, capital punishment, and self-defense."

I also looked in the Hebrew dictionaries for the word used in the commandment “Thou shall not kill.” It is the word **ratsach**. Strong’s and the NAS Exhaustive Concordance define that word as murder/slay/put to death. The BDB includes with it “with intent” and “without intent.” Therefore, even if you unintentionally kill someone, even someone you didn’t hate, it was just an accident, you are considered a murderer (Deut. 4:42). In the time of Moses, that manslayer could flee to one of the refuge cities for his own protection. I take this to mean that there is no difference between murdering someone and killing someone, intentionally or unintentionally, in war or in self-defense. It is the same taking of life. Additionally, if Jesus declared that just hating someone in my heart is akin to murder, then how dare we declare an acceptable distinction between murder and killing.

What ifs?

At this point I usually hear the sputtering interruption: Well, WHAT IF someone breaks into your house, points a weapon at you, and threatens to rape you or your wife or daughter, would you just stand there and let that happen? And I have to honestly answer that I do not know how I would react. For most difficult scenarios, we do not know what we will do until we are in the situation. I might just faint dead away, or I might run, or I might try to do everything in my power to rescue us unharmed from the situation, short of killing the intruder. I can’t tell you ahead of time what possible defensive weapons might be at hand (a frying pan, a baseball bat, a broom?!), or whether my phone will be on me, or who else will be there. I can definitely say that I would be scared to death and would pray like crazy for God’s help. I do not want to plan to kill someone, however, I do not know if I actually might do so given the situation. I do not own a gun, although my husband has several. I’m being frank to say that I do not know about the what ifs. However, if we decide and plan that we will kill someone who threatens us, would that be pre-meditated murder? I don’t practice shooting at targets with the human silhouette. I did not suggest to my sons and daughter to enter the military. (By the way, their dad was a 9-year Marine who later converted to a pacifistic view and would not suggest it either.) I believe that we must not expect and plan for this kind of WHAT IF.

Another WHAT IF I’ve encountered revolves around the possible reinstatement of the draft. I’ve been told by someone who was drafted into military service during the Vietnam War that he “had no choice.” Yet that’s not true at all. He had choice: he could’ve chosen to refuse to serve and thus serve jail time or he could’ve chosen to flee the country, for instance. We always have choice. Just some choices are more difficult and unappealing than others. If Jesus was crucified for his beliefs, and Paul was imprisoned for the same, do we dare think ourselves superior to them, exempt from persecution? What takes more courage: to pick up a rifle to defend oneself or to stand weaponless before a threat? Do we prefer to be a part of a killing machine than to lay down our lives for others?

The greatest and last commandment

Here we are, back at the beginning of this presentation. We are commanded to love God and others and to pray for and do good to our enemies. We are commanded to make disciples of all nations by teaching them what Jesus taught. We are commanded to imitate Christ. If we Christians do not start demonstrating a wide difference between God-like love and worldly love, the world will not come to know Him. We must love, and we must pray, and we must expect (hope for) GOD to act on our behalf, and above all, we must know that our eternal life has been won with a great price, an example that we are obligated, as Christians, to imitate.