

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

St. Gabriel's Church

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Every one of us has—at some time—either heard or said the following words:

“IF YOU REALLY LOVED ME, YOU WOULD....” And the completion of those sentences is as varied as the people who speak them. Would anyone care to volunteer some of the endings?

-do the dishes? -not use that tone of voice with me?

-fold the laundry while it's still warm from the dryer?

-quit bouncing checks at the bank?

In my family, Leslie and I have learned what the usual and customary terms are. If I would really demonstrate my love for Leslie, she will get a back rub at the end of a trying day of playing the piano and waving her arms as a choral music conductor. If she would demonstrate her love for me, it will be to communicate regularly when our lives land us in different places on the planet. (I need to tell you: I'm the best loved man on the planet, with a friendly greeting card each day in my new Marion post office from a most remarkable wife. Thank you, God, for this Leslie.)

Jesus, as God's love made manifest to us in human form, has joined the chorus of those who want to help us to show our love, our loyalty and care, in appropriate ways.

If you love me, keep my commandments... Let's unpack this a bit, along with the words that follow, and see what he's getting at.

First, it's important to see how Jesus frames the discussion of what matters most to God and what is most critical for us to observe.

Notice that the main event is *loving*. While there are all kinds of spiritually based behaviors we can focus on, for the disciples of Jesus, for us, *loving must be the main event*. God knows that we're all susceptible to make secondary things primary. We do this partly because the secondary things are easier; partly because they may make us feel like we are very special; and partly because we feel as though we are in control of the situation. In Paul's famous passage of his first letter to the Corinthians, he urges us to keep the main thing the main thing.

I may have the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues, or of interpreting divinely inspired sounds, but unless I am *loving*, it contributes absolutely nothing to God's glory or to my store of heavenly treasure. Whether I have great knowledge and expound on all the celestial mysteries, or I prophesy, or am sacrificially generous, or have faith to do momentous things, without love, the whole thing collapses into the dust heap of "nice tries." No glory to God; no captives set free; no broken lives set right.

Other spiritual development paths have similar tangential side tracks: Concentrate the powers of your mind, and you can bend a spoon. For some, the focus of a spiritual path is to make contact with those "on the other side," channeling, acting as a medium, offering to guide others into the discovery of their purported former lives. Out-of-body experiences like astral projection captivate some spiritualists. There are fascinating mind-body side tracks like yogic flying. Doing a little research, I was surprised to learn that a group in Washington DC was hosting an annual gathering to demonstrate achieved prowess in this skill. The "Annual Continental Yogic Flying Competition" featured the "50 meter dash, 25 meter hurdles, high jump, and long jump--all performed in the traditional cross-legged yogic sitting position." (The Straight Dope / Questions or comments for Cecil Adams to: [cecil@chicagoreader.com](mailto:cecil@chicagoreader.com).

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As Trinitarian Christians, we probably respond with something between amusement and derision. As a Christian pastor, I find some of these spiritual paths problematic, and even dangerous, as we believe that there are unclean or deceptive spiritual influences in the spiritual realm as well as salutary, holy encounters with the living Spirit of God. My aim here is really not to ridicule the various ways that people try to deepen or broaden their spirituality. I suspect that we could find some developmental benefit, some sort of “fruit for life,” even in the most arcane spiritual practices. The reason I begin with the Apostle Paul’s list of tangents is to demonstrate that all of us—whether Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, or New Age Mystic—tend to drift off track, majoring in minor subjects. Jesus takes us to the heart of the matter: a genuine relationship with God is the main event. A genuine relationship with God will be characterized by the love of God.

What does the love of God look like? It looks exactly like the life of Jesus. In Jesus, John tells us, God’s intent and concern for us was wrapped up in human flesh and sent to dwell among us. The Word became flesh. Based on that truth, Jesus appeals to us to emulate him, to follow his example and teaching, to keep his commandments. If you love me (which must be the heart of biblical spirituality—the first commandment is that *we love* the Lord our God with all our hearts, mind, soul and strength) keep my commandments. And these commandments guide us in the specific steps of growing into the love of God, the care (or love) of our own souls, and the love of our neighbors.

A simple definition of this kind of love, expressed in the Greek word, *agape*, is unconquerable benevolence. Unconquerable benevolence, or good will. The love of God will show itself in us as *an invincible determination to seek another’s well being*. Please repeat with me: The love of God... is an invincible determination... to seek another’s well-being. It’s the same quality of care we bring to a spouse, to a child, a friend, an acquaintance, a stranger, and yes,

even to an annoying, irritating neighbor, and yes, even to one who sees us as an enemy.

Notice that the love of God doesn't so much seek another's approval, affection, or even the other's feelings of contentment or happiness. The love of God will provoke uneasiness in us to the degree that it shows us that we're off course, or stuck in a rut, or refusing God's will in our own souls. But the love of God will always promote health, wholeness, genuine joy, and well-being.

Well how the heck does God expect us, mere mortals, to think, feel, pray, and act like Jesus?

Happily, Jesus promises us help to take us where he commands us to go. If you love me, keep my commandments, and I will pray the father, and he will give you another comforter (or advocate) even the spirit of truth. The Greek word used here is *paraklete*, like the pet bird, but with an "L" added after the "K." If we unpack this word expansively, it means "one who answers our call for help, who comes along- side us, and equips us to face our challenge." When John speaks of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, it is with the understanding that this is the promised gift of God within us and among us. The Holy Spirit acts in us by bringing to our remembrance the truth that Jesus has spoken, bringing to our hearts the peace that Jesus has brought, bringing to our wills the determination to walk as he walks.

We can better understand the alternate translation of *paraklete* as The Comforter, when we distinguish between its contemporary American usage and its original sense. For most of us, a comforter is a cozy, soft spread on a bed, something to be wrapped in to keep warm. When we think of comforting, we imagine a mother wrapping a disturbed little child in her arms, kissing away tears, and consoling. And certainly God's Holy Spirit can and does deal with us this way when we need it. But more importantly, and more toward spiritual

maturity, The Comforter is the one who, together with us, (“com” as in company, companion, common, community) makes us brave and strong to face our adversity, (from “fortis” as in fortress or fortissimo.)

So here’s our take home package. Jesus assures every one of us who hear his voice that we can know, enjoy, and share the love of God. More than that, he tells us simply that *we must* do all that. Our salvation is wrapped up in receiving the gift of that gracious love. And to enable that indwelling and transforming miracle to occur in us, and through us to all the world, He sends the Holy Spirit into our midst.