

Jesus in His Own Words

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In the recent kerfuffle over same-sex marriage, a lot of people have offered a lot of different opinions about what Jesus would say on the subject. Some of these opinions appear to be well grounded in Scripture; others leave me wondering whether the opinion-giver has ever opened a Bible. Of course, this points to a larger problem. In many areas of doctrine, men are fond of saying, "Jesus would have said this," or "Jesus would have said that," even though there isn't a shred of textual evidence behind their claims. This is idolatry. It is inventing a God who is what we want God to be.

The only cure for the disease is to fall out of love with our own imaginings and turn to the Bible instead. It provides us with the only reliable evidence about what Jesus did and taught. This Jesus is very different from what others want Him to be. He may be very different from what we want Him to be. However, what we want is quite frankly irrelevant. What matters is what He wants, and to learn about that, we must listen to Jesus in His own words.

What Jesus Stood For

Throughout this sermon, I'm going to support every assertion I make by quoting the words of Christ. They are the only reliable guide to what He would say if He were on the earth today. Let's begin, then, by considering what Jesus stood for. First, He stood for **OBEDIENCE TO THE LAW**. This is plain from His words in Matthew 23:23. Here, He is criticizing the Pharisees, who had gotten so caught up in the minutiae of the Law of Moses that they forgot the big picture. However, Jesus' solution to the problem is not to tell them to ignore the small stuff. Instead, He tells them that they must keep every commandment in the Law, from the weightiest down to the least significant. This is borne out through the rest of Jesus' teaching. Without exception, He commanded the Jews of His day to keep the Law.

This is where many of the modern-day re-interpreters of Jesus go so badly wrong. They remember that Jesus commanded love, but they forget, or didn't know in the first place, that Jesus said that love is the essence of the Law and the Prophets. Love is not some nebulous concept with a meaning we get to invent on our own. God in His word has already defined what actions are loving or unloving, either in the Law of Moses for the Jews of twenty centuries ago, or in the law of Christ for Christians today. If some action is forbidden in the word, it cannot truly be loving, no matter how we feel about it. Trying to understand Jesus outside of the context of the Law is like trying to understand a play in a football game without knowing the rules of football. We can make up our own meaning, but that's all we're doing.

However, Jesus didn't stop there. He stood for **A HIGHER STANDARD** than what the Law demanded. Look at Matthew 5:20. In fact, the rest of Matthew 5 consists of an elaboration on this theme. The scribes and the Pharisees read the Law mechanistically. It said, "Don't commit adultery," so they didn't commit adultery, but they felt free to lust after any woman on the planet. By contrast, Jesus viewed every sinful action as the product of a corrupt heart, and He required His listeners to purify their actions and their hearts alike. The Law said, "Don't murder." Jesus said, "Don't murder, but don't hate either." The Law said, "Don't swear false oaths," but Jesus said, "Live with such integrity that you make oaths unnecessary." The result of this was not to overturn the Law. Instead, it was to revitalize the Law, to require God's people to be holy inside and out. The same thing is true for us today. Jesus doesn't want us to be practitioners of a rote, ritualized Christianity. He wants us to have both clean hands and pure hearts.

On the other hand, Jesus' reverence for the Law did not lead Him to equal reverence for the little rules that the self-righteous Pharisees had made up. Instead, He stood for **REJECTION OF TRADITION** when men sought to bind those traditions on others. We see this, among other places, in Mark 7:6-7. Let me pause here momentarily to mention what this verse doesn't mean. Jesus isn't saying here that it's wrong for us to have traditional practices in our congregation. It's not wrong, for instance, that other churches in this area continue to have Sunday evening services, even though Sunday evening services are nowhere commanded in the Scripture and they've been holding them for 75 years. What is wrong, though, is when we elevate our traditions to the level of God's word and bind them on others. For instance, no Christian has the right to tell us that we in the Joliet church are sinning because we don't have Sunday evening services. That is a black-letter example of teaching as doctrine the commandments of men, and it is sinful. That reverence for human tradition isn't a noble thing; instead, it is the first step down the road to denominationalism. After all, isn't a denomination distinguished by its particular human traditions? We must follow the Bible, and the Bible only.

Jesus' emphasis on God's law, and on God's law alone, was matched by His emphasis on **MERCY**. We see one of many instances of the mercy of Jesus in John 8:10-11. Jesus was harsh and uncompromising with the self-righteous Pharisees who denied their need for forgiveness, but He was always willing to give second chances to sinners who repented of their sin. There are two main ways in which Christians typically miss the mark here. On the one hand, they turn a willfully blind eye to the sin of their brethren. They don't talk about it, they don't go to their brother about it, and they don't require repentance. That's not what Jesus did, and behavior like that stems more from an ungodly desire to avoid conflict than it does from the desire to imitate Him. On the other hand, though, a lot of Christians want to join up with the Pharisees and start collecting rocks. Interestingly enough, that too reflects a desire to take the easy way out. It's

easy to get puffed up and angry about somebody else's sin. It's easy to throw rocks at them. It's hard, though, to work patiently with them until they repent. However, that hard middle path is the path that Jesus took.

Finally, Jesus stood for **LOVE**. He tells us so in John 15:9. Every act of Jesus that the Scripture records was an expression of love, and this is true even of the things that we don't normally think of as loving. When Jesus called Peter a devil, that was love speaking. When Jesus chased the moneylenders out of the temple with a whip, that was love acting. The love of Jesus wasn't some warm, cuddly tranquil emotion. It could be angry. It could be blunt. It could be demanding. However, in all of those tempestuous moments, Jesus was driven by His love for His Father and His neighbor. Our experience should be the same. If we truly love our brother and we see him falling away, that will make us angry, not because he's violating our rules, but because he is endangering his own soul. When we don't have that reaction, that's not love. It's apathy. When we seek to become more loving, we must define love on Jesus' terms.

Why Jesus Came

All of these things were important principles to Jesus during His time on earth, but why did He come to earth in the first place? Once again, opinions vary widely here, many of them offered by people who don't have a clue about what Jesus' purpose actually was. Let's reflect on His true intentions now, to focus our minds for the Lord's Supper.

First, the Scripture tells us that Jesus came **TO FULFILL ALL RIGHTEOUSNESS**. Let's read together from Matthew 3:14-15. As we've already seen, Jesus was scrupulous to obey the entire law of God. This passage tells us how far He was willing to go to do this. Jesus knew, of course, that John the Baptist was a genuine prophet. John preached a baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins. Jesus didn't have any sins to repent of, and John knew it, but He asked John to baptize Him anyway. Here's why this was important: later in His ministry, Jesus often made the point to the rulers of the Jews that John was a prophet and they should have obeyed him. If Jesus hadn't been willing to go through with the baptism He didn't need, the priests and elders could have turned right around and charged Jesus with disobedience too. Jesus lived in such a devoted way that He denied His enemies any opportunity to accuse Him.

Second, Jesus came **TO SERVE**. He tells us so Himself, in about as many words, in Luke 22:27. I fear that brethren often fail to appreciate how central service was to the character of Jesus. Jesus was here for God and for other people. Period. I can't think of any incident in any of the four gospels that shows Jesus being self-centered. How do our lives compare to Jesus' life? Are we constantly on the lookout for ways that we can help others and glorify God? Or, instead, do we prefer to regard service as something that happens to somebody else? As I've said on any number of occasions, there are many, MANY things that need doing in this congregation alone. I'm also pretty sure that most members of this church don't have schedules filled up with serving the Lord. Brethren, if there are things that need doing, and we aren't already going full-bore carrying out God's work, how can we possibly refuse to take a greater role? How can we possibly think about Jesus and all He has done for us, and say, "My time is too precious for me to spend that couple of hours doing something for Him"? That's not who Jesus was, and it's not who His disciples are either. If it's who we are, we may wear the name of disciples, but our lives disprove the claim that we make.

Third, Jesus came **TO CALL SINNERS**. Once again, there's not much mystery about this point. Look at Luke 5:31-32. Jesus was holy. Jesus was perfect. Jesus was sinless. However, He was not a God for holy and perfect and sinless people. Instead, He came in search of those who knew they weren't holy and perfect and sinless, so that through Him they could be cleansed of their sins. It's still the same for us today. We need to remember that God isn't nearly as impressed by us as we are. None of us are going to do anything that will justify us in His sight. However, as we acknowledge our own unrighteousness, we must also remember that Jesus came to comfort those who sorrow over their sin, who recognize that they have a spiritual wound that will never heal on its own. True Christianity is not a faith for the proud. It is not a faith for those who are unconcerned about all the ways they fall short of God's glory. However, no matter what we have done, if we humbly turn to Jesus in search of healing, we will surely receive it.

Fourth, the Scripture teaches us that Jesus also intended from the very beginning **TO DIE**. There are many places in Scripture where He makes this clear, but one of them is Mark 9:30-31. As I've said before, one of the oddest positions held by the false doctrine of premillennialism is that Jesus' death wasn't part of God's plan. They maintain that Jesus came to reign as an earthly king in Jerusalem in order to fulfill the everlasting covenant that God made with Abraham, and when the chief priests and elders killed Jesus instead, they somehow defeated God's purpose. To be quite honest, I have no idea how they square that with either the power of God or with Jesus' own words. For one thing, would it even have been possible for the enemies of our Lord to capture and kill Him without His cooperation? I daresay that twelve legions of angels would have cut quite a swath through the mob in the garden of Gethsemane. For another, if it was never Jesus' intent to be crucified, why does He predict it over and over again? Even an ordinary human could have saved himself from arrest if he knew it was coming, as Jesus clearly did. If Jesus had headed for Galilee on Wednesday, He wouldn't have been around for Judas to betray. And yet, despite the angels, despite all the advance warning, Jesus died on the cross. There's only one logical conclusion we can draw from this: From the very beginning, it was Jesus' goal to be crucified. He never meant to reign as an earthly king; He came to offer His life on the cross.

Of course, this was never a sacrifice without meaning. Instead, Jesus came **TO GIVE LIFE** to all of us. He makes this point in provocative fashion in John 6:53-54. On the face of this statement, Jesus appears to be advocating cannibalism, and that's the way that many in His first-century audience understood it. They decided that He was crazy and not worth listening to, and they left. In reality, Jesus was not encouraging His followers to devour His physical body, any more than He was telling Nicodemus to physically re-enter his mother's womb in John 3. Instead, just as baptism in John 3 is a metaphorical rebirth, so the Lord's Supper in John 6 is a metaphorical meal of Jesus' flesh and blood. Jesus tells us that we cannot receive eternal life unless we share in this spiritual feast. As with baptism, our state of mind is essential. It is during the Lord's Supper that we confront the horrible, inescapable fact that Jesus suffered on the cross, and we praise Him because even though we weren't willing to live for Him, He died for us. What is more, the Lord's Supper calls us to examine ourselves. We often pray before we eat for God to help us "to partake in a manner worthy of that great sacrifice." That's important. A thoughtless baptism is just a bath, and a thoughtless Lord's Supper is just a snack. However, focus for this five minutes a week is insufficient. Instead, our calling is to live in a manner worthy of that great sacrifice. Do we? Let's consider this as we partake.

What Jesus Asks

Now that we know what Jesus stood for and why He came, we need to learn what He asks from us. What kind of people does Jesus expect His followers to be? There are people out there who take all kinds of strange stands and claim that they're doing what Jesus would want them to. Are these claims that can be backed up with Scripture?

In reality, the Bible teaches us that the first thing that Jesus wants to see from us is **OBEEDIENCE**. John 14:15 emphasizes this. As is no surprise to any of us, obedience to the commandments of Jesus is not a popular idea in modern-day America, even among those who claim to be His followers. Most people would rather make a big deal about how much they love Him and then live the way that they want to. Jesus' cynicism about people like that comes through clearly in His words here. A Christian who claims to love Jesus but won't obey Him is like a wife who claims to love her husband but cheats on him. The actions tell a different story than the words. In reality, love and obedience are linked. The more we love Jesus, the more we will desire to carry out His will in everything. This is true about everything from Bible authority to evangelism. By contrast, when we aren't interested in God's will in those areas, that reveals that our love for Jesus isn't what it should be. This is a harsh truth to acknowledge, but we must if we want to please our Lord.

Second, Jesus asks us for **SACRIFICE**. This is evident from His provocative words in Luke 14:26. Jesus' point here is not that we should literally hate our loved ones. Instead, He wants us to see that our love for Him is so great that we would be willing to turn our backs on our families in an instant if that's what it took to serve Him. I would suggest, friends, that if our love for those closest to us must be hatred compared to our love for Jesus, then we must also comparatively hate everything else in our lives. Recently, I've noticed a disturbing trend among brethren. An awful lot of Christians are willing to sacrifice serving God for their jobs or their families or their hobbies, but they aren't willing to sacrifice their jobs or their families or their hobbies in order to serve God. They aren't willing to clear their schedules for a work day or a singing or a gospel meeting. They aren't willing to make a stink so that they don't have to work on Sunday morning or Wednesday evening. They will put God first when it is convenient to put Him first, but the instant a conflict arises, it's "Sorry, Jesus. Maybe next week." Friends, our brethren in the first century thought serving Jesus was important enough that they were willing to face torture and death for His sake, and we're not willing to miss an early Bears game? The Savior who died for us deserves better than that. Let's be sure to give it to Him.

In fact, what Jesus asks from us here is **IMITATION** of Him. Let's read together from Matthew 10:38-39. All of us have heard before that as disciples of Jesus we should imitate Him. In fact, when we became disciples, every one of us agreed to imitate Him. However, it's no accident that the metaphor that Jesus used to describe this imitation was taking up our cross and following Him. There's a difference between following Jesus and having a path that coincides with His. In some areas, it's easy to imitate Christ because His actions are the same thing we would have ended up doing anyway. Jesus believed in God, and you know what, I believe in God too! This being like Jesus thing is easy! In these areas of coincidence, we don't have to change to be like Jesus because we're pretty much there already.

In other areas, though, what we want does not coincide with what Jesus did. That's where we come to the cross-bearing part of discipleship. Jesus didn't have any pet sins in which He refused to obey God. Do we? Jesus was willing to accept ridicule and hatred from His countrymen as a consequence of telling them about what God wanted. Are we? Jesus put nothing in His life, even the preservation of that life, above serving God. Do we? The point is, friends, that our commitment to imitate Christ is an awesomely far-reaching one, and we can't fulfill that commitment by staying who we are. We have to be willing to change ourselves drastically, and if we aren't, then we aren't truly willing to imitate Him.

As what I've said here makes clear, following Jesus doesn't only mean doing things that look smart in worldly terms. It means doing things that look foolish, that will leave us at an earthly disadvantage if we do them. However, Jesus calls us to do that, because He asks us to **TRUST** Him. Let's read together from Luke 12:29-31. Very often, we read this text in a very soothing, reassuring way, as saying that God is going to take care of us no matter what. That's not true.

God is only going to take care of us if we seek His kingdom first, and that's why this passage is as much demand as promise. Seeking God's kingdom first isn't some kind of vague, nebulous idea. Instead, it means that in all of the decisions that we've talked about already, we will make a choice that by earthly standards is the wrong choice. It means that we will go to our boss at work and explain to him what God requires our schedule to be. We will stick to that, even if it means that we get fired, because we trust that God won't allow our family to starve if we put Him first. It means that we will have that taboo conversation with our non-Christian family members, because even if we infuriate them so greatly that they won't ever talk to us again, we trust that God will give us a church family to replace them. It means that if our boyfriend is pressuring us to have sex with him, we will break up with him before we agree, even if we love him, because we trust in God to give us a righteous man who won't lead us into sin. That is what putting the kingdom first looks like. That's what it means to trust God, and if we don't we need to pray to Him for increased faith until we do.

Finally, Jesus expects us to **LOVE** like He loved. This is plain from John 13:34. What an intimidating commandment this is! We know that Jesus expressed His love for us by giving everything for us. We, then, must express our love for one another by giving everything for one another. This is especially true for the things that we least want to give. If we're introverts who don't really care for other people, Jesus wants to see us express our love for our brethren by spending time with them. If we're not too big on giving our time to help someone else, Jesus wants to see us express our love through service. If we're tight with our money, Jesus wants to see generosity from us toward our brethren. If we're naturally mouthy and obnoxious, Jesus wants to see our love in the way we swallow our words and work toward peace in the congregation. Only when we hold nothing back can we claim to love as He loved.