

Keeping the Commandments of Jesus

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this evening.

Our theme at this conference is “malama.” I will take as my starting point the Bible passage mentioned in our conference materials— John 14:15, where Jesus tells his disciples, “If you love me you will *malama* (keep) my commandments.” It seems to me that keeping the commandments of Jesus should be central to the daily lives of all Christians, so I welcome the opportunity to share some ideas with you on this topic.

Of course, the Two Great Commandments come to mind right away—the commandments to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Jesus also gave us the Great Commission, to make disciples of all nations and teach them to obey his commandments. But when I think of keeping the commandments of Jesus, I think of all his teachings, including the Sermon on the Mount and the parables. I would like to approach the subject this evening in that broad sense.

The Risks of Speaking from the Heart

I want to speak from the heart. I know there are risks in doing that. First, there is the risk of being irrelevant—the risk that what I say will not be helpful to you. After all, I don’t know each of you, so I don’t know where you are on your faith journey. I also don’t know much about what is happening in the life of the Hawaii Conference of the UCC. So I don’t know how to be most helpful.

Second, there is the risk that I will simply be wrong about what I have to say. I have taken half a dozen theology courses, but I am not a seminary graduate, as many of you are. I come to you as a layperson, a church member. There are no doubt many things that I don’t understand. I may also

be wrong because I am a sinner, not only in the sense of being imperfect, but also in the sense of the original meaning of the words “to sin,” which is “to miss the mark.” I have given this talk a lot of thought and prayer, but I know that I may miss the mark.

Third, there is the risk that I may offend some of you. If so, I apologize. That is not my intention— my intention is simply to speak from the heart. My hope is that somehow, my words may be helpful, I may not miss the mark too badly, and my words may not offend you so much as encourage you on your own journey as a Christian seeking to truly live your faith.

Avoiding the Commandments of Jesus

To use the definition of “malama,” my concern is that many Christians do not care for, preserve, maintain, protect, or support the commandments of Jesus. I say this because of the things that I have heard Christians say in person, or on TV, or in print, throughout the United States. I am not singling out the United Church of Christ in this regard. I am reacting to things that I see and hear as I travel and work in my daily life. And what I see and hear is that many Christians have shifted their attention away from what Jesus taught us.

I find this very disturbing because I believe that Jesus not only came to die for us, I believe he came to teach us how to live. I believe that we should take his teachings very seriously. After all, he is the Christ, the Son of God. He was teaching on the highest possible authority. His teachings should shape every aspect of our lives. Nothing should supersede what he taught us.

One of the most surprising things about the Synoptic Gospels— Matthew, Mark, and Luke— is that in those gospels Jesus said little about himself. The gospel of John, which scholars believe was the last of the four gospels to be written, is focused more on who Jesus was— the Christ, the Savior. But the main thrust of the Synoptic Gospels is the teaching of Jesus, and the focus of his teaching was on the kingdom of God and how we should live.

When it comes to how we should live, I don’t think Jesus is too hard to understand. The Two Great Commandments and the Sermon on the

Mount seem clear enough. There are other statements, and some of the parables, that seem to present us with puzzles, and there are also some translation issues, but by and large, I think that Jesus was very clear.

He also taught by direct action. He healed the sick, and fed the hungry, and reached out to the outcast. While we do not have his miraculous powers, we, too, can do these things. We can help the sick, and feed the hungry, and reach out to the outcast. I like the question: What would Jesus do? But I think the answer should depend on a more basic question: What *did* Jesus do? I think what he did is very clear. I believe he *intended* it to be very clear.

So it troubles me that so many Christians ignore, and even contradict, what Jesus taught us. They act as though Jesus never said what he said, or what Jesus said is not important, or what he said is not really binding on us, or what he said is less important than what somebody else said.

Tonight I want to talk about two ways that Christians seem to avoid or displace the commandments of Jesus: First, worshipping Christ while ignoring Jesus, and second, trying to be Old Testament Christians.

Worshipping Christ While Ignoring Jesus

Our relationship with the Son of God must begin by accepting him as Christ. When we accept him, we should feel humble, and immensely grateful for our salvation. We should pray to Christ, and worship Christ, and gather together to sing his praises. We should feel joy in our relationship with him. In fact, we should be so grateful, and feel so much joy, that we should be deeply dedicated to living the way he taught us to live.

Unfortunately, many Christians seem to believe that accepting Christ is all they need to do. They have been saved. They are forgiven. They just need to believe—they don't need to behave. I call this the problem of "worshipping Christ while ignoring Jesus." By ignoring Jesus, I mean ignoring the teachings of Jesus, ignoring his commandments. It is a very tempting thing to do. It is easier to go to church, and sing hallelujahs, than to go out into the world to love and serve others—especially people we don't like very much. Worship is easier than works.

But worshipping Christ while ignoring Jesus eliminates the moral content of our religion, and makes us look like hypocrites. This is one of the reasons that so many people are cynical about Christians. If they know what Jesus taught, and they know we aren't following his teachings, then they have no reason to respect us. Worshipping Christ while ignoring Jesus also eliminates our opportunity to witness and evangelize through the way we live. We should preach through our deeds. A quote that has been associated with St. Francis says it best: "Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary."

I think this problem of worshipping Christ while ignoring Jesus has been a problem for Christians for nearly two thousand years. Today, it is a special problem for us Protestants.

When we broke away from the Roman Catholic Church about 500 years ago, the breakup was accompanied by arguments about the relative importance of faith and works. The Catholic Church and Martin Luther understood the importance of *both* faith and works. Their positions were actually very close. But the Catholic Church emphasized works, and Luther emphasized faith.

We Protestants believe that we are saved by faith, not by works. We are saved by God's grace. That grace is a gift. We know that we don't earn our way to heaven by doing good deeds. So we can easily slip into the mistaken belief that once we are saved, we're done. All we have to do is go to church, pray regularly, maintain a personal relationship with Christ, and that's it. The rest of the time, we can do what we want.

But Jesus taught us that it is not just about faith, it is also about works. He commanded us to love people and help people. He challenged us to grow spiritually through the way we live. Faith may come first, but it must flow into good works. At John 14:12, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing." I am partial to the statement in James 2:17: "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." Faith and works are both essential.

So it is good to go to church, praise the Lord, thank God for his grace, and thank Christ for dying for our sins. It is good to go to church, greet each other, listen to a sermon, talk to our friends, sing hymns and praise songs, and go home happy and renewed. It feels good, and it *is* good. It is good to

get together and worship as the body of Christ. It is good to rejoice together, and support each other.

But if we only worship Christ and ignore the teachings of Jesus, we devalue Christianity as a way of life, because there will be nothing different about us— we will be living like everybody else. We can label ourselves “Christian,” but the label won’t mean much. Jesus said, “By their fruit you will recognize them.” If we ignore the teachings of Jesus, our fruit will be pretty much the same as everybody else’s fruit.

Even worse, when we only worship Christ and ignore the teachings of Jesus, we find ourselves doing things that directly *contradict* the teachings of Jesus—things that Jesus himself would find abhorrent. When Christ is detached from the teachings of Jesus, *anything* can be done in his name. And I am very saddened to say that, over the past centuries, anything and everything *has* been done in his name. Christians have also failed to act when Jesus clearly called them to act.

When Americans are surveyed, usually somewhere between two thirds and three quarters say they are Christian or they identify with the Christian faith. And we Americans have resources. For at least 50 years, we have been the richest country on the planet. So why do millions of American children go to bed hungry every night? How do we explain that to Jesus? Why are so many people homeless, sleeping on the streets? And why has it been so hard for us to develop a system of universal health care, like other advanced industrial nations? How do we explain to Jesus the fact that millions have not had health care at all, others have gone broke trying to pay for the healthcare they need, and still others have died without receiving the help they need?

Yes, reasonable people can disagree over exactly how to help the poor or the homeless or provide healthcare to those who need it, but the bottom line is simple: Why don’t we follow the teachings of Jesus and feed the hungry and provide shelter to the homeless and help the sick? Yes, many of the solutions are political. So what? I agree with Jim Wallis, who says that religion is personal but not private. Jesus was political. He attacked the power structure of his day. Why shouldn’t we be willing to take political action in order to feed the hungry, house the homeless, and heal the sick?

Of course, many Christians are feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, and healing the sick. We thank God for them. We know that we can achieve much through our churches and non-profit organizations. But why are these actions of compassion so low on the agenda of a nation that claims to be Christian? It seems to me that too many Christians are worshipping Christ while ignoring Jesus.

Old Testament Christians

Another way to avoid or displace the teachings of Jesus is to focus solely on the Old Testament. There seem to be three characteristic beliefs of Christians who focus on the Old Testament. First, they see God as a warrior God, not a God of love and peace. Second, they believe that God rewards the faithful with material wealth, not just spiritual riches. And third, they believe that it is more important to be holy and exclusive than to be compassionate and inclusive.

The Warrior God

First, Old Testament Christians see God as a warrior God. The warrior God is certainly a powerful image in the Old Testament. God fought for the Israelites in the exodus from Egypt and the conquest of Canaan—the Promised Land. Samson and Saul and David killed thousands of their enemies. Sometimes, when a town was captured by the Israelites, the Israelites killed all the men and women and children—*all of them*. This was seen as an offering to God, because the Israelites did not benefit from their conquest—they kept no slaves, and no animals, to serve them after their victory. They killed them all.

Material Rewards

How about the second characteristic of Old Testament Christians—the idea that God rewards the faithful with material wealth?

We see this idea often today among those who preach “Prosperity Theology.” People believe that if they are faithful to God, God will reward them not just spiritually, but with material prosperity—a bigger house, a better job, a higher salary, and a parking space in front of the stadium.

This idea can certainly be found in the Old Testament. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph were faithful and prospered in material terms. And you can browse through Proverbs to find support for this idea. Here is Proverbs 10:22: “The blessing of the Lord brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it.” And here is Proverbs 13:21: “Misfortune pursues the sinner, but prosperity is the reward of the righteous.” Then there is Proverbs 22:4: “Humility and the fear of the Lord bring wealth and honor and life.”

Holy and Exclusive

How about the third belief of the Old Testament Christians, that it is more important to be holy and exclusive than compassionate and inclusive? This is an idea that was firmly established in the Jewish community at the time of Jesus. We read in Leviticus 19:1-2: “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: “Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.”’

Jewish leaders wanted to honor God by being perfectly holy. To them, that meant not doing anything, or being near anyone, whom they considered unclean or unholy. The holiness codes and laws regarding purity can be found in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The purity laws literally divided the world into two kinds of people—the clean and the unclean, the acceptable and the unacceptable. It was a rigid system of rituals and laws that created a huge class of people who were considered unclean and unacceptable.

Purity had to do with food and meals, corpses, bodily emissions, childbirth, and bodily imperfections. In some cases, violating the rules of purity was considered wrong and sinful—such as eating forbidden foods. In other cases, violating the purity rules was not wrong or sinful, but the impurity still needed to be removed. Removal might be accomplished by the passage of time, or ritual washing, or sacrifices at the temple.

There was a serious problem with this system, which is that the poor—who constituted about 90 percent of the population—could easily become permanently impure. The Israelites paid taxes to the Romans and a tithe to the temple authorities. Peasants lived at a subsistence level, and their combined tax and tithe payments could have been anywhere from 28 percent to 40 percent of all their earnings, according to the estimates of scholars.

The poor could not escape paying the Romans, who used military force to collect taxes. That meant that the poor would often fall in debt to the temple. The temple responded by condemning the peasants and labeling them unclean. If a peasant was considered to be unclean, and was just too poor to make a sin offering, he could not receive forgiveness. The temple was closed to him. He was socially ostracized and cut off from reconciliation with his God.

So there is indeed a basis in the Old Testament for all three of these beliefs of Old Testament Christians—the belief in God as a warrior God, the belief that God rewards the faithful with material prosperity, and the belief that it is more important to be holy and exclusive than compassionate and inclusive.

Other Voices in the Old Testament

But there is a problem, here. There are *other* voices in the Old Testament. For example, not all the images in the Old Testament are about a God of war and violence. Isaiah gives us many images of peace. For example, in Isaiah 2, we read about the nations streaming to the Lord’s temple:

He will judge between the nations
and will settle disputes for many peoples.
They will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore. (Is 2:4)

There are also verses that seem to contradict the second belief of the Old Testament Christians, that God rewards the faithful with material wealth. If one continues to browse in Proverbs, one will find Proverbs 11:4: “Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death.” Then there is Proverbs 11:28: “Whoever trusts in his riches will fall, but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf.”

Even more impressive is the entire book of Ecclesiastes, which is a long discourse against power, wealth, fame, and physical pleasure. The voice in Ecclesiastes declares that all those things are ultimately meaningless. At Ecclesiastes 5:10 we read: “Whoever loves money never

has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless.” The only meaning comes from fearing God, and enjoying one’s daily work and daily bread.

When it comes to being holy and exclusive, rather than compassionate and inclusive, we find the voice of the prophets. They were passionate about social justice. They attacked the rich and cried out on behalf of the poor. They were angered that empty ritual piety had replaced a living faith, and that burnt offerings had replaced true knowledge of, and obedience to, the Lord.

Jesus Disagrees with Old Testament Christians

So we can see that the first problem with the beliefs of Old Testament Christians is that they are selective— they are focused on only part of the Old Testament. The second problem is much, much bigger. The second problem is that Jesus strongly disagrees with the beliefs of Old Testament Christians. In fact, countering those beliefs was a big part of his ministry.

Jesus revealed to us a God of love and peace, not a God of war. He said blessed are the peacemakers, not blessed are the war-makers. He taught us to love our enemies, not to kill them. He said that those who live by the sword will die by the sword. He articulated concepts of non-violent resistance, such as turning the other cheek and walking the extra mile. Scholars describe Jesus as leading the peace movement of his day—a movement that rejected the Zealots who wished to overthrow the Romans by violence, and instead encouraged *nonviolent* resistance. Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. both learned about non-violent resistance from the teachings of Jesus.

How about the idea that God rewards the faithful with material prosperity? Jesus was very clear about material wealth. He said that “a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” He said:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also...

No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.” (Matt. 6:19-21, 24)

We know the story of the rich young man who asked Jesus what he must do to get eternal life. Jesus told him to obey the commandments. The rich young man said he had kept the commandments— what did he still lack?

Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth. Then Jesus said to his disciples, “I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”
(Mt 19:21-24)

So Jesus clearly wants us to be spiritually rich, not rich in material things. If we happen to be rich in material things, we are called to share those things with others.

How about the third belief of the Old Testament Christians, that it is better to be holy and exclusive than compassionate and inclusive? Jesus was definitely for compassion and inclusion. He did everything he could do to reach out to the poor, the sick, the disabled, prostitutes, tax collectors— anyone and everyone considered unclean in the purity system. He broke the rules by eating with the unclean and healing on the Sabbath. He turned over the tables of the money changers in the temple, the holiest place in Israel.

Jesus was fierce in his attacks on the Pharisees, who gave the highest priority to ritual purity and holiness. The Pharisees were sincere in their desire to be holy, but their desires led them astray. Matthew 23 reports on the seven woes that Jesus pronounced against the Pharisees. The Pharisees appeared on the outside to be righteous, but on the inside they were full of hypocrisy and wickedness. While trying to be holy, they were ignoring the more important matters of justice, mercy, and faithfulness. Christians who are trying to be holy and exclusive, today, are in effect trying to be the *new* Pharisees, exactly the kind of people Jesus did not want us to be.

The (Mis)use of Religious Doctrines

This desire to be holy and exclusive instead of compassionate and inclusive shows itself in the use of religious doctrines. I have met many Christians who are trying to assure themselves that only *their* religious doctrines are right, so they are going to be saved, while people who believe differently are wrong, and are going straight to hell.

I find this very disturbing. I think it is important to note that Jesus himself was not doctrinal. He let us know that he is the Messiah; that he is the way and the truth and the life; that nobody comes to the father except through him; and that he was going to die and be resurrected and ascend to the father. Those are essential truths.

But Jesus didn't create the church doctrines that we have today. Our doctrines were developed by theologians and church leaders after the resurrection. The Apostle's Creed, which was probably the earliest, is estimated by scholars to have been written a hundred years after the resurrection, and the Nicene Creed was 200 years after that. So there really weren't any doctrinal issues for Jesus. He did not test people on their doctrinal beliefs before he decided to help them, and he did not establish any doctrinal requirements for entering the kingdom of heaven or enjoying eternal life.

What were the requirements for Jesus? Faith and works—*both*. Faith is the essential first step. Here it is important to note that faith and belief are not the same. We use the words “faith” and “belief” more or less interchangeably in our daily conversation, but they are different. Faith is trust and confidence in God. It is personal and direct, between us and God. It is what connects us. Beliefs are different—they are attempts to describe God. Many of our beliefs have been codified as formal church doctrines. So we have faith *in* God, but we have beliefs *about* God.

Jesus asked those in need if they had faith, because it was through their faith that he healed them. If we have faith, Jesus wants us to take the next step—to take action, to do good works. Notice that in the parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus says that those who will spend eternity with him are those who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, provide hospitality to the stranger, clothe the naked, look after the sick, and visit those in prison. That was it. The parable does not mention any doctrinal tests for eternal life.

The same is true of the statement in Matthew 16:27, in a passage describing the Second Coming. The verse says: “For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done.” There is no mention of judging each person according to what he or she has believed— just what he or she has done. Jesus requires faith and works, not beliefs and works.

The doctrines that have been developed over the centuries by church leaders and inspired individuals are valuable guides and summaries. The UCC position, as I understand it, is that the historic creeds and confessions of our ancestors are testimonies but not tests of faith. I think that position is spiritually wise and Biblically consistent with the teachings of Jesus. Doctrines are testimonies, not tests. For that reason, I do not believe that Jesus will prevent any of us from going to heaven if we make doctrinal errors.

Unfortunately, over the centuries, Christians have become so committed to doctrinal issues that they have killed each other over them. Tens of thousands of Christians have been killed by other Christians over differences that amount to a few words or the specifics of a few ritual practices.

I bought a book that describes Protestant denominations and their beliefs. I have read parts of the book, and I have trouble understanding the differences between the various denominations that I have read about. The differences don’t look very big to me. And if I remember correctly, there are more than 200 Protestant denominations listed in the book.

Why are we not closer together? We are all children of God, we all worship Christ, and yet we fight each other, or are uncomfortable with each other. Why can’t we affirm our doctrines, while allowing others to affirm theirs? Why can’t we hold fast to our own beliefs, while respecting the beliefs of others? Why can’t we be united in our faith, even as we differ in our doctrines?

This really shouldn’t be an issue. We should all be walking together on the road to Emmaus. As we walk, we can be open to understanding others, and we can be open to the spiritual growth that may occur in us as a result of new understandings.

Doctrines should help us understand God, not drive a wedge between us and other members of the body of Christ. The Christian life can be informed by doctrine and theology, but it is not *about* doctrine and theology. It is about loving God and each other. It is about following Jesus. It is about faith and works.

Choosing to be Left Behind

I find it embarrassing to listen to Christians talk about who is going to be saved. That is not up to us. That is God's decision. We don't know what God knows—we don't know everything that is going on in the spiritual lives of others. We shouldn't pretend that we do.

In the meantime, I am troubled by ideas such as those in the *Left Behind* series of books. So far as I can tell, most Christians over the centuries have believed that the rapture is part of the Second Coming. However, in the *Left Behind* series, the rapture is a separate, earlier event seven years before the Second Coming. In this earlier, separate rapture, believers are instantly transported to heaven, leaving everyone else behind to suffer years of tribulation.

I am not surprised that these ideas about the rapture are comparatively recent, and have been put forth in novels, starting in the 19th century. However, what troubles me is that some Christians seem to enjoy the idea that they will be saved—they will be translated directly to heaven—while others will be left behind to suffer.

That troubles me because Jesus calls us to love and help everyone, Christian and non-Christian, friend and foe alike. He taught us to be Good Samaritans. So if indeed there is going to be a time of tribulation, then that is when we will be needed the most. Anyone who is a follower of Jesus would want to stay behind, to minister to those in need. If the time of tribulation is a dangerous time, and we die loving and helping others, then we will die doing what Jesus has called us to do. Perhaps our love for others during the time of tribulation will tell people more about the teachings of Jesus and the love of Christ than anything they have ever seen before. Perhaps they will come to understand, and will accept Christ, and will be saved, too. And when we go to the hereafter, and see Jesus face to face, perhaps we will hear him utter those wonderful words: “Well done, good and faithful servant!”

Excluding Others

I am saddened when Christians use their churches to do what Jesus never did— to exclude others. More than any other historical or religious figure I can think of, Jesus made it clear that he included everyone. To make that clear, he even reached out to the outcasts— the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the lepers. He did not condone their behavior or ignore their condition. He just loved them, and welcomed them to a new life in him.

American Christians as a whole have not done a good job of following Jesus in this regard. For the past 200 years, we have struggled with discrimination against others based on race, gender, age, disability, and sexual orientation. The United Church of Christ and its predecessor churches have accomplished much in this struggle, but overall, Christians have not welcomed people the way Jesus welcomed them. What is especially painful is to see churches turn away people who need Christ and want to worship him, but are not allowed into the church because of the prejudices of church members. People are being turned away in the name of Jesus, when Jesus never turned *anybody* away.

Isn't it embarrassing to see Christians trying to be more exclusive than Jesus? Why would anyone try to be more "pure," more "holy," more exclusive than the Son of God himself? Why would we exclude anybody from Christian fellowship? Why does anybody else have to prove they are worthy? None of us is worthy. We are all saved by grace. It is a gift. If God is willing to give it to us, why would we begrudge it being given to others? Is it less of a gift to us when others receive the gift as well? Are we diminished in any way when others receive the gift we have received? I don't think so.

Jesus commanded us to love each other. Why don't we just focus on that? Why don't we just love people? Love is not the same as approval or agreement. It is deeper than that. It is an attitude of good will toward all of God's children. God loves everyone— why don't we? Jesus reached out to everyone— why don't we? There is an infinite amount of God's love to go around. Why should we be trying to limit it? Who do we think we are? We are here to spread God's love, not restrict it. We are here to do God's work, not sabotage it.

I think we go astray for at least two reasons. One is that we succumb to the huge influence of our secular, commercial culture. We yield to the dominant social and political pressures of our day. It's hard to be counter-cultural. So we accept the values, customs, and prejudices of our culture, even when those values, customs, and prejudices clearly contradict the teachings of Jesus. It is easier to ignore Jesus than to ignore our culture.

I think we go astray for another reason—our faith is not strong enough. My guess is that Christians who seek to be exclusive, and reject others, are acting out of a sense of fear, or inadequacy, or anxiety, or doubt. If we have to put others down or keep others out in order to feel special; if we have to make sure that others will go to hell to reassure ourselves that we are going to heaven—then we need to strengthen our faith. That is what Jesus asks us for: Faith. If we truly trust God, if we truly have faith in Christ, then the fear, or inadequacy, or anxiety, or doubt, should decrease or even disappear. Jesus told us not to worry so much. We should listen to him. We should not worry so much.

The (Mis)use of the Bible

One more sad note. In an effort to support doctrinal purity and exclusiveness, many Christians turn to the Bible for justification. They pick out verses here and there, and often string together some very unlikely combinations of quotations, to prove a point. Even worse, some Christians use Bible verses as poison darts that they throw at each other.

I believe that the Bible is the Word of God. I believe it exists for our enlightenment, not as a weapon to be used against each other. I also believe that none of us can fully understand the Bible. Certainly, we can know a lot about the Bible, and it is always worthwhile to learn more. But very few of us can read the scriptures in their original Hebrew or Greek, and very few of us know about the politics, economics, and social practices that existed during the times when the Bible was written. We aren't trained, so we should be modest in our claims. We should be saying things like: "This is what this passage in the Bible means to me, but I cannot read the Greek original, and I do not know much about the culture and customs during the time of Jesus when these words were written, so I don't fully understand the context in which the words were said." I realize that's a long statement, but you get the idea: When it comes to quoting the Bible, a little humility is a good thing.

While we should always be learning and growing toward God, we simply don't have to know everything. There is, and should be, mystery. It's okay if we are still looking through a glass darkly. We really don't have to know everything. It is okay for God to know some things that we don't. The full, detailed, contextual meaning of the Bible may be one of those things we don't fully understand. Let's study, and learn all that we can, but let's be humble.

So, there is a basis in the Old Testament for the beliefs of Old Testament Christians— that God is a God of war, that God rewards the faithful with material prosperity, and that it is better to be holy and exclusive than compassionate and inclusive. But those are not the only ideas one finds in the Old Testament. Even more important, they are ideas that are completely contrary to what Jesus taught us. Jesus urged us to move beyond the Old Testament, beyond war and wealth and exclusivity, beyond merely obeying the law and the prophets. Jesus urged us to aspire to higher goals for our own spiritual growth.

So here is what it comes down to, in my view. I believe that you cannot be an Old Testament Christian. The words are an oxy-moron. You can be an Old *and* New Testament Christian, and you can be a New Testament Christian, but you cannot be an Old Testament Christian.

Yes, the Old Testament is important. But if you only pay attention to the Old Testament, and ignore Jesus and the New Testament, *by definition* you are not a Christian at all. You may be a good person, you may believe in God, and you may be entitled to respect for your beliefs. However, you have completely missed the point of Christianity. The word "Christian" means someone who believes in Christ. Christ is not in the Old Testament. If you are only focused on the Old Testament, you are missing Christ. You are missing what he said. You may in fact be living a life that contradicts his teachings.

The Spiritual Benefits of Following Jesus

I assume that this avoidance or displacement that I have been describing— worshipping Christ while ignoring Jesus, and trying to be Old Testament Christians— is due to the fact that the teachings of Jesus are very demanding, even radical. It is hard to live the way he taught us to live. But

we should strive to live that way, even if we stumble and fall, and have to pick ourselves up, and stumble again. It is better to take what steps we can, however halting, however often we fail, than to take no steps at all. I like the statement from Scottish author and minister George MacDonald, quoted by C.S. Lewis, that God is easy to please but hard to satisfy. Each step forward on our spiritual journey, each step toward God, pleases God. But we cannot stop. We have to keep moving. God will not be satisfied until we reach the perfection that he desires for each of us.

I believe that if we have truly accepted Christ, then we should be filled with joy, and want to do all that we can to live the way our Savior taught us to live. He told us that the Holy Spirit would be with us, to help us on the way. Knowing that we are living the way he taught us to live should give us great meaning and purpose in our lives.

I know that Jesus told us to take up our crosses and follow him, but when I think about his commandments, what I see is not suffering but spiritual freedom. I think Jesus wants to free us from our secular, commercial world so that we can grow toward God. And he wants to prepare us for the kingdom of God— a kingdom that is clearly different from the kingdoms of earth. In fact, everything Jesus said about the kingdom of God suggests that it is pretty much the opposite of our secular commercial culture. It's not about power, but about loving service. It's not about material wealth, but about spiritual richness. It's not about fame, but about intimate, caring relationships. It's not about exclusiveness, but about an open, welcoming inclusiveness. Jesus wants to liberate us, and move us forward on our spiritual journeys.

And why wouldn't we want that? The teachings of Jesus may be demanding and radical, but wouldn't we like to live in a world full of people who live the way he taught us to live? Wouldn't we like to live in a world that is more like the kingdom of God? Wouldn't we like to live in a world characterized by love and peace, instead of hate and war? Wouldn't it be great if people were no longer dying of hunger or disease? Wouldn't it be wonderful if the children of God treated each other as the children of God?

We pray the prayer that Jesus taught us, a prayer that includes the words, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Jesus taught us about the kingdom, and he told us God's will— he told us

what God wants us to do. So wouldn't it be great if we just went out and did it? What could be more joyful and exciting?

Again, love is the key. There are more than twenty verses in the New Testament that urge us to love each other—including our enemies. It is a core message of the gospels. I think we are designed to run on love. When we love, we are at our best. We are who God intends us to be. We are who God calls us to be. So why don't we just go out and love people? Love can change our own lives, as well as the lives of those we love. Loving others is meaningful, and meaning is a key to being deeply happy. The happiest people I know are busy loving and helping others.

So Jesus is demanding, but when we follow his teachings, we discover a new kind of inner peace. He said that his yoke is easy and his burden is light. Perhaps he said that because when you follow him, there are so many things you don't have to worry about anymore. You don't have to worry about being rich, famous, or powerful. You don't have to worry about your social status. You don't have to worry about doctrinal purity. You don't have to worry about putting up walls to keep out the people you don't like. You don't have to worry about being saved. That's up to God, and if you believe in Christ, it's already been decided in your favor. And you don't have to worry about what to do. The parable of the sheep and the goats is an obvious place to start. Feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, provide hospitality to the stranger, give clothes to the naked, look after the sick, and visit those in prison. There's plenty of work there for all of us.

I have met many, many Christians who are really uptight. I know it's not nice to say that, but it's true. They are worried about their worldly success, their social position, their doctrinal purity, and their exclusiveness. They live nerve-wracking lives filled with insecurity and even fear. They frown a lot, and use up lots of energy looking down on others. This is not what Jesus wants for us. He wants us to be spiritually free. He wants us to live joyfully. I can imagine Jesus putting his hands on the shoulders of one of those uptight Christians, smiling at him, and saying: "Relax... relax!" Then he would turn, and point, and say: "There's a hungry child over there— go and feed her."

I believe that the spiritual rewards that come from keeping the commandments of Jesus are not just in the hereafter. They can be now. The kingdom of God can, indeed, be at hand. His kingdom *can* come, his will

can be done, on earth as it is in heaven. We just have to keep his commandments. If we do, we will discover a deeper happiness and a greater peace than we have ever known. I think that is what Jesus wants for us—deep happiness and inner peace.

I see Jesus standing there, smiling at us, beckoning to us, inviting us into a new life. However difficult it may be, however often we may fall short, we should smile back at him, and accept his invitation, and move forward, step by step, toward his kingdom. If we do, we will truly be his people, and we will truly be his church.

What more could we want? What more do we need?

Let us pray.

Lord, you created this universe, with its vast resources. You sent us your Son to teach us and save us, and the Holy Spirit, to guide us and encourage us. We have faith in you. We ask that you be with us, as we strive to put our faith into action, and grow toward you, day after day, by keeping the commandments of Jesus. In Christ we pray, Amen.