

Jesus Did It Anyway

Presented to Skalholt Cathedral

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Let's begin with a prayer.

Lord, we thank you for this wonderful day, for this historic place, and for this special time together. We ask that you bless us as we seek to know your truth and to live as you taught us to live. In Christ we pray, Amen.

I'd like to talk with you today about the Paradoxical Commandments and how they relate to Scripture. I will be sharing the main themes of my book, *Jesus Did It Anyway: The Paradoxical Commandments for Christians*.

Let me start with some background for those of you who are not familiar with the Paradoxical Commandments. I was very involved in student government during high school. When I went on to college, I continued to work with student leaders. It was the sixties, and in the United States, the sixties were a time of idealism and hope, but also conflict and confrontation on many college campuses. It was a provocative time. During those years, I saw a lot of idealistic young people go out into the world to do what they thought was right, and good, and true, only to come back a short time later, discouraged, or embittered, because the change they sought didn't occur, or nobody appreciated what they were trying to do.

I had two messages for them. First, I told them that they really had to love people, because change usually takes time, and love is one of the few motivations that is strong enough to keep you going until the change you seek is achieved. Second, I said that if they did what was right and good and true, they would find meaning and satisfaction, and that meaning and satisfaction would be enough. If people appreciated them, that was fine, but if they didn't, it was okay. If they had the meaning, they didn't need the glory.

The Paradoxical Commandments

When I was 19, a college sophomore, I wrote a booklet for student leaders. It was called *The Silent Revolution: Dynamic Leadership in the Student Council*. It was a leadership manual, about motivation and how to build coalitions and count

votes and not lose your ideals when you have to compromise. In that booklet, on just one page, I wrote 149 words that I called the Paradoxical Commandments. This is what I wrote:

1. People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered. Love them anyway.
2. If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives. Do good anyway.
3. If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies. Succeed anyway.
4. The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway.
5. Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. Be honest and frank anyway.
6. The biggest men and women with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest men and women with the smallest minds. Think big anyway.
7. People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs. Fight for a few underdogs anyway.
8. What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway.
9. People really need help but may attack you if you do help them. Help people anyway.

And finally:

10. Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth. Give the world the best you have anyway.

Ten Paradoxical Commandments. The Paradoxical Commandments are guidelines for finding personal meaning in the face of adversity. That's why the first phrase in each commandment is about adversity, or difficulty, or disappointment. People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered. The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. People really need help but may attack you if you do help them.

But each statement about adversity is followed by a positive commandment: Love people anyway. Do good anyway. Help people anyway.

The paradox is that even when the world is going badly— even when the world is crazy— we can still find personal meaning and deep happiness. We do that by facing the worst in the world with the best in ourselves.

There are lots of things in life that we can't control— lots of external factors. We can't control the world economy, or natural disasters, or when a terrorist might attack, or what companies will create jobs and what companies will eliminate jobs. We can work hard, and prepare, and seize opportunities— we have to do that. But there are a lot of things we can't control.

What we can control is our inner lives—our spiritual lives. We get to decide who we are going to be, and how we are going to live. And we can live our faith, and we can live our values, and we can be close to our families and friends, and we can do what we know is right and good and true, no matter what. *No matter what.* And the good news is that that is how people have been finding a lot of personal meaning for thousands of years. The even better news is that finding personal meaning is a key to being deeply happy.

Where the Paradoxical Commandments traveled

Well, I wrote the Paradoxical Commandments in that student leadership booklet, which we published and distributed around the United States. We sold about 25,000-30,000 copies between 1968 and 1972. I went on with my life, and for 25 years, I had no idea what was happening to the Paradoxical Commandments. What I know now is that the commandments were spreading all over the world, until today it is estimated that they have been used by millions of people.

I know now that they were used by business leaders, government officials, military commanders, religious leaders, university presidents, teachers, social workers, athletic coaches, and students. They were used by Boy Scouts in Canada and the United States, and Rotary Clubs in Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Alabama. They were used by student leaders in South Africa, and the Cambodian Free Speech Movement, and an Iranian news and culture organization. They were used by a homeless shelter in Philadelphia, a welfare agency in Texas, a Family Council in Ohio, and a Methodist church in Kansas. Karl Menninger used them in a speech at the United Nations in 1981. They were published in John C. Maxwell's book, *Becoming a Person of Influence*, Wayne Dyer's book, *There's a Spiritual Solution*

to *Every Problem*, and Stephen Covey's new book, *The 8th Habit*. They can be found on thousands of websites.

The discovery that changed my life occurred in September 1997. That was when I learned that Mother Teresa had put the Paradoxical Commandments up on the wall of her children's home in India. It seemed to me that God was sending me a message. I felt called to speak and write about the Paradoxical Commandments again after 30 years had passed.

As a result of my books and the publicity that came with them, I now hear from people all over the world. My website gets 10,000 or more visitors per month, from 70 or 80 countries. People tell me what the Paradoxical Commandments mean to them— how they have used them to raise their children, or get through a tough time at work, or establish their goals. I set out to inspire people, and now they are inspiring me. I have become part of a growing network of kindred spirits, and I am deeply grateful. I have been very blessed.

Resonating with Christians

I am very pleased to say that the Paradoxical Commandments have been used by many Christians. The Paradoxical Commandments have been preached from pulpits, published in church newsletters, posted on church and parish websites, and included in books by many Christian writers.

For example, they were used by Abel Muzorewa, a Methodist Bishop who was the Prime Minister of Zimbabwe-Rhodesia. They were translated into Japanese and used in homilies by a Japanese Catholic priest in Tokyo. They were translated into Inuktitut, an Eskimo dialect, and used by missionaries in Canada. They appeared in the St. John's parish magazine in Wakefield, England. They were included in a student manual on morality and ethics published by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, and a young adult Bible study curriculum published by the United Church of Christ. They were published in Dr. Robert H. Schuller's book, *Turning Hurts into Halos*; Neil T. Anderson's book, *Victory Over the Darkness*; and John Hagee's book, *The Seven Secrets*.

I think that the Paradoxical Commandments have resonated with Christians because Jesus used paradoxes to help us understand the kingdom of God. His paradoxical statements turned the secular world upside down. He said that "the last will be the first, and the first will be last." He said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

He said that “whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

Think about the Beatitudes. You don’t need to look too closely to see that the Beatitudes are paradoxical truths about the life of the spirit. Jesus did not say “Blessed are the rich and famous, blessed are the powerful and clever.” He said “Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the pure in heart.”

In my daily professional life, I think very often about what Jesus said about leadership. He lived in a world, like ours, in which leaders were all about power. He rejected that kind of leadership. Again, he turned the world upside down, and urged us not to be the powerful ruler, but the thoughtful servant. We know from Mark 10:42-45 and Matthew 20:25-28 that Jesus gathered his disciples around him and he said:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

We also know from John 13:12-15 that on his last night with his disciples, Jesus got up from the table at which they had been eating, poured water into a basin, and washed the feet of his disciples. He told them that he did this to demonstrate how they were to serve each other. To truly lead, we must not rule but serve, and no act of service should be considered too menial for us.

Jesus not only used paradoxes in his teaching— his life itself was paradoxical. He was the Son of God, but he was born in a stable; he was the King of Kings, but he had no place to lay his head; he was the Savior who healed the sick and brought Lazarus back to life, but he himself died on a cross.

Jesus lived a paradoxical life. I believe that he is calling us to live a paradoxical life, too.

I believe that God wants us to be happy. *Deeply* happy. I believe God wants each of us to have the kind of happiness that really touches the spirit and connects with the soul. And I believe God has tried to make it clear how to achieve that kind of happiness. We achieve it by living our lives in meaningful ways. In the Old

Testament, he pointed out what does *not* make life meaningful. Then Christ came, and pointed to what *does* make life meaningful.

Ecclesiastes

Let me share three key messages. The first is the message of the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes was probably written in the 3rd century B.C. but it is an astonishingly modern book. It is about the search for meaning. The voice of Ecclesiastes concludes that power, wealth, fame, physical pleasure, even knowledge and wisdom are fleeting, like a breath of wind, and are ultimately meaningless. The only meaning comes from obeying God and enjoying our daily work and our daily bread.

The book of Ecclesiastes was written before the coming of Christ, and for Christians, it seems rather existential, even cynical and disheartening. But then Christ came, offering us new hope. He showed us how to find meaning and deep happiness by following him.

In the World, not of the World

The second key message is that we Christians should be *in* the world but not *of* the world. At the Last Supper, when Jesus prayed for his disciples, he said:

I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.

“The world” in this passage means the society or culture in which we live—the world of business, government, the military, schools, the media, and social institutions. “The world” is the material world, the secular, commercial world, not the world of God and faith.

Jesus was *in* the world. He walked among us. He ministered to us. He taught, and healed the sick, and fed the hungry. And he wanted his disciples to do the same. In his prayer, he said he did not want God to take his disciples out of the world—he just wanted God to protect them from the evil one.

As disciples of Jesus, we should be *in* the world, loving and helping others. As we minister to those in need, we will experience joy and sorrow, we will learn to forgive and be forgiven, and we will grow toward God.

However, while Jesus was *in* the world, he was not *of* the world, and he did not want us to be, either. As disciples of Jesus, we aren't defined by the ways of the world. We don't have to have the same goals and lifestyles as the secular, commercial society that is all around us. We don't have to seek symbols of secular success like power, wealth, and fame. We don't have to be among the social elite. We don't have to live the way others expect us to live.

Jesus is not calling us to be “successful” in the worldly sense. He is calling us to follow Him. If we do, we will be blessed. We will be blessed whether we are “successful” or not.

God has given each of us certain talents and abilities. When we use the gifts he has given us, we have the opportunity to glorify him. If we use those gifts well, we may be “successful” in the eyes of the world. If so, that success is simply a by-product of seeking to do God's will. If we achieve power, wealth, or fame, we know that they are simply tools to be used in serving God. They are resources that we should use in loving and helping others. I have a slogan I made up about money, which is this: “There's nothing wrong with money that giving it away can't cure.” There is joy in being a Christian who generates and channels resources that can be used to do God's work.

We should remember that Jesus didn't come to condemn the world, and we don't have to condemn it, either. The point is not to be *against* the world. The point is that our faith isn't *about* secular, commercial success or social prestige. Our faith is about loving God and following Christ.

The idea that we should not be *of* the world is a key to living the Paradoxical Commandments. Each commandment begins with a statement of adversity—a statement about something that is difficult in life. “People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered... People really need help but may attack you if you do help them...” Each statement about adversity is really about difficulties or failures in the secular, commercial world—the world of “success.” But each statement of adversity is followed by a positive commandment. The positive commandment is really about our spiritual lives— loving and helping others, and doing what is right and good and true.

The paradox here is that when things in the secular, commercial world are going badly, our spiritual lives can still be meaningful and full of deep happiness.

That is why Jesus does not want us to be *of* the world. He wants us to be free to grow spiritually and find deep happiness, no matter what the world does to us.

Good Friday

That brings us to the third key message, which is the message of Good Friday. What happened on Good Friday is painful to think about. Jesus was beaten and scourged, and mocked, and forced to carry the cross. He suffered on the cross, and died on the cross. The world inflicted on Jesus all the cruelty and pain and hate it could inflict.

But the story of Good Friday is not only about how the world treated Jesus. The story is also about how Jesus *responded* to the way he was treated. And his response was astonishing. It was breathtaking.

In the face of cruelty and pain and hate, Jesus loved people *anyway*. He forgave people *anyway*. And he saved people *anyway*.

What a powerful message! Even on the cross, suffering and dying, Jesus showed his love by connecting his mother with his disciple John. Even on the cross, suffering and dying, he saved one of the robbers who was crucified with him. Even on the cross, suffering and dying, he asked God's forgiveness for those who had crucified him.

The loving, forgiving spirit of Christ triumphed over all that the world did to him. The world couldn't change who he was and what he came to do. Good Friday was not a defeat— it was a major victory. On Good Friday, Jesus triumphed over *life*. Then, on Easter Sunday, he triumphed over *death*.

On Good Friday, Jesus demonstrated that our spiritual lives are not about how the world treats us. Our spiritual lives are about how we *respond* to the way the world treats us. If we respond the way Christ did, we will always find meaning and deep happiness. I believe that is what he wants for us. Christ wants *his* triumph on Good Friday to be *our* triumph, too. We, too, can triumph over life before we triumph over death.

So— those are the three key messages. Ecclesiastes reminds us that power, wealth, fame, and physical pleasure are fleeting and ultimately meaningless. Jesus described his disciples as being *in* the world, not *of* the world. And on Good

Friday, Jesus demonstrated that our spiritual lives are not about how the world treats us. Our spiritual lives are about how we *respond* to how the world treats us.

The Paradoxical Commandments Are about Action

It is important that the Paradoxical Commandments are about action. They are about loving, and helping, and doing good *anyway*.

When I find myself beginning to doubt what I can accomplish, I remind myself that Jesus was not the only one who walked on water. The apostle Peter walked on water, too. Peter walked on water *when he had faith and walked toward Jesus*. If we have faith and walk toward Jesus, we will be amazed at what we can accomplish. And if we have moments of fear and begin to sink, Jesus will reach out and catch us—just as he reached out and caught Peter.

James wrote: “Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins.” So we need to take action. Our faith should flow into our deeds. We must use the gifts God has given us. If we do, we will surely make a difference. We will fulfill our purpose, and find meaning and deep happiness. We will be blessed, and we will be a blessing to others.

Will You Answer the Call?

My book, *Jesus Did It Anyway*, ends with this passage:

Jesus is calling you to a paradoxical life. He is not calling you to worldly success. He is calling you to serve God.

He is calling you to be *in* the world, not *of* the world. He is calling you to love and help people, *no matter what*. He is calling you to reach out to those in need and make a difference *now*.

You may have worldly riches, or you may not. But you can always enjoy the richness of a life with God.

You may have worldly power, or you may not. But you can always experience the power of Christ.

You may have worldly fame, or you may not. But you can always be known to the Holy Spirit.

You may lose your way, or you may not. But you can always walk with God.

You may suffer, or you may not. But you can always find deep happiness in Christ.

You may know fear, or you may not. But you can always find encouragement in the Holy Spirit.

Jesus is calling you to a paradoxical life.

Will you answer his call?

Jesus did it *anyway*.

Will you?

Let us pray.

Lord, we thank you for your son, the Christ. We ask that you give us the courage to follow him, and live the paradoxical life, so that we may find the personal meaning and deep happiness that you want for each of us. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.