

John 14: 15-31, continuing in the departure narratives

¹⁵⁻¹⁷ “If you love me, show it by doing what I’ve told you. I will talk to the Father, and he’ll provide you another Friend so that you will always have someone with you. This Friend is the Spirit of Truth. The godless world can’t take him in because it doesn’t have eyes to see him, doesn’t know what to look for. But you know him already because he has been staying with you, and will even be *in* you!

¹⁸⁻²⁰ “I will not leave you orphaned. I’m coming back. In just a little while the world will no longer see me, but you’re going to see me because I am alive and you’re about to come alive. At that moment you will know absolutely that I’m in my Father, and you’re in me, and I’m in you.

²¹ “The person who knows my commandments and keeps them, that’s who loves me. And the person who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and make myself plain to him.”

²² Judas (not Iscariot) said, “Master, why is it that you are about to make yourself plain to us but not to the world?”

²³⁻²⁴ “Because a loveless world,” said Jesus, “is a sightless world. If anyone loves me, he will carefully keep my word and my Father will love him—we’ll move right into the neighborhood! Not loving me means not keeping my words. The message you are hearing isn’t mine. It’s the message of the Father who sent me.

²⁵⁻²⁷ “I’m telling you these things while I’m still living with you. The Friend, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send at my request, will make everything plain to you. He will remind you of all the things I have told you. I’m leaving you well and whole. That’s my parting gift to you. Peace. I don’t leave you the way you’re used to being left—feeling abandoned, bereft. So don’t be upset. Don’t be distraught.

²⁸ “You’ve heard me tell you, ‘I’m going away, and I’m coming back.’ If you loved me, you would be glad that I’m on my way to the Father because the Father is the goal and purpose of my life.

²⁹⁻³¹ "I've told you this ahead of time, before it happens, so that when it does happen, the confirmation will deepen your belief in me. I'll not be talking with you much more like this because the chief of this godless world is about to attack. But don't worry—he has nothing on me, no claim on me. But so the world might know how thoroughly I love the Father, I am carrying out my Father's instructions right down to the last detail.

"Get up. Let's go. It's time to leave here."

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John 14:15-31

Keep My Commandments

Kerra Becker English

Jesus says, “The person who knows my commandments and keeps them, that’s who loves me.”

That’s great. But I would like to know exactly which commandments Jesus is talking about here.

Is he talking about all 613 Mitzvot – the count of all the laws and rules of the Torah? Or is Jesus talking about the 10 commandments – what we usually think about as Old Testament Law? Or is he talking about the Golden Rule – do unto others as you would have them do unto you? Or is he talking about the two commandments he saw as the post-it note version of all the other laws?

Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as you love yourself. Or is he talking about his long discourse in the Sermon on the Mount in which he tells us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us? Does it count as a commandment for us when he says to the rich young ruler, “Go and sell all you have and give it to the poor?”

And then, what about the tricky points he tries to make in all his parables? We want to know the details like the lawyers and the important people who come to Jesus asking for clarification, “Who is my neighbor?”

To which commandments will we be held accountable? That’s an important question. It’s a question that is particularly relevant as Christianity seems to be going through an identity crisis, yet again. There are plenty of Christians right now who live their lives as though “right belief” is far more important than any practice of their faith. If you say you believe in Jesus in your public life, seemingly you can get away with a lot – lying, power grabbing, ignoring the poor. If you have prayed for salvation in your church life, and gotten on board with the program of who’s in

and who's out, that's what really matters. It's this same contingency who is all in an uproar about "religious freedom." And just so we're clear about where I am on this, saying "no" to baking a wedding cake for a gay couple does not make that person a martyr for the faith, and it has nothing to do with actual religious freedom. The freedom to practice your religion without persecution doesn't give one license to take a mean spirit with others who understand their own practices differently. That's a whole lot of ridiculousness proclaimed by those who are either woefully ignorant of what the Bible says, or who take certain rules from the Bible that confirm their own prejudices and run with them, believing that those implications are the most important ones. It's hard for me to tell these days just how widespread this interpretation of "keeping the commandments" happens to be. But it has always been with us – always.

And this ain't what Jesus meant by saying, "Keep my commandments." He didn't mean that we can allow his words, or use the Bible's words to justify our own agendas. He railed against such nit-picky behavior in his own time. He criticized the religiously pious for self-righteously washing their hands for purification when they didn't watch at all the filth that was coming out of their mouths. That's just one example. I can think of plenty more where Jesus has this understanding of the commandments of God as gifts of justice and of mercy for the faithful, rather than as tools for judgment and persecution for those who miss the mark.

So even though the "Thou shalt not's" outnumber the "Thou shalt's" by about two to one in the Law of Moses, Jesus' commandments to us are often about what we can do, what we must do, to show how much we love him by demonstrating our care toward the people that he loves. When Jesus speaks in a commanding tone, it sounds more like this: Love God, love your neighbor, love yourself, love your enemies. Feed my sheep. Proclaim release to the captives. Restore sight to the blind. Judge not. Remember me.

Repeating Jesus' words, he says, "the one who KNOWS my commandments and keeps them – that's who loves me." The knowing part takes work. It's not just being able to count the "do this", and "don't do that" statements in the Bible. It's not even being able to accurately assess which commandments Jesus has in mind here. It's about getting to know Jesus enough that it makes sense to us what he's asking us to do. It's taking his look at the world seriously. I think of it more like this. When I was growing up, I didn't have a written down list of all my parents' commandments. Now, I could rattle off some of their favorite lines. I still can. The disciples could surely do that too when it came to Jesus' words. But I had a good enough understanding of their rules to know when I was in the realm of what they wanted me to be doing or likely to be out of bounds and expect consequences for getting "caught." We are charged to know Jesus that well. We should just know what he expects of us. We should know what loving God and neighbor demands of us. And then in doing that, we show Jesus our love.

That's the second part, right? We can't just know his commandments, we are supposed to keep them. Within the past ten years, a couple of authors have tried the experiment of "living Biblically" to see how it goes in today's world. The anecdotes told about trying to live literally into all the proscribed laws of the Bible are both strange and funny. To try and do everything Biblically is to step back in time and not have the context for why it made sense not to eat pork or wear clothes made out of two different materials. Again, that's not what Jesus is asking here. He explains further about what it means to keep his commandments by saying, "If you love me, show it by doing what I've told you."

Jesus isn't asking for our worship here. He doesn't say, "If you love me, sing me songs of devotion." He doesn't say, "If you love me, go door to door and tell people about me." He doesn't say, "If you love me, you'll be mad at people who don't call me Lord and Savior." He

doesn't say, "If you love me, build buildings where my followers gather." So many of the things that have been done in Jesus' name have little to do with what he wanted from us. What he wants is for us to live into the radical sense of love that he created in his ministry. He's asking us to love completely, to honor all people, to celebrate life, and not be so afraid of dying. If you love me – show me. Don't tell me – show me.

And he also has a word for those who choose other paths, he says, "Not loving me means not keeping my words." For this, I have to think he's talking about the commandments most often attributed to him. Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself. If you can't love God, you don't love Jesus. If you can't love your neighbor, like in a tangible, observable way, you don't love Jesus. If you are hyper-critical of yourself, it's going to be hard to love Jesus too. For Jesus it was about the words – but only so far as the words pointed to real actions in the world.

There's a lot at stake for Western Christianity in today's world. Much of it has become words without meaning, or a meaning that Jesus himself would find intolerable. It is important for us to know his teachings, to get to the very heart of them and know them in their depths. We may have to become apologists for what Jesus really meant when he said, "Know my commandments." Folks these days put words in Jesus' mouth that aren't really him. If the rhetoric sounds more like hate or the outcome feeds a church leader's greed, you can bet it's not really Jesus who's seeing the love. So for those of us who want to be humble in our knowledge, and slow to say we know absolute truth, it's difficult to get our voices heard above those who claim to have Jesus in their pocket.

So the only way to demonstrate another possibility and maybe turn the tide even a little bit is to put our words into action – just as Jesus encouraged us to do. If you love me, show me. Make it perfectly clear to Jesus that you are being guided by love, even if it means that sometimes around

the edges you won't be sure that you're doing all the right things. Love is something that doesn't have only one right answer. Loving can have a whole multitude of answers, complex mazes of answers. Love is not limited by denomination, or theological understanding, or political preference, or gender, or wealth, or personality. Knowing and keeping the commandment to love is not so clear cut, but it is its own reward. Know and keep what Jesus asks, and Jesus will feel all the love we have to give him, and he will increase our capacity for even greater love. I'm sure of it. Amen.

Laws can only give us information; they can't give us transformation. (Paul, Richard Rohr)