

Jesus Out of the Box

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Most “talk of God” and “love of wisdom” (theology and philosophy) produces wide-ranging debates, shared insights, occasional correction, and often astonishingly bitter exchanges. Is there actually a God? Is Jesus God? Did he ever say he was? Did he actually live? Did he say the things the Bible says he said? Do Christians really do the things he said they should? Does believing in Jesus get you into heaven? Does not believing get you into hell? Is there actually a life after this one that contains either a heaven or a hell? Did God make the world from nothing in six days? Is the Bible original, or just a rehash of Babylonian and other myths? What about Buddhism? Tantra? Scientology? Darwin? Fritjof Capra? Behe? Leisure suits and big hair?

For any of us, the questions come about as fast as sentences can be typed, maybe faster. The answers come too, often at odds with the mainstream culture, with others, even with oneself. They come sometimes striding arrogantly, sometimes sheepishly. They grow complex and endless and fetid and make me just want to go fishing. For fish.

But instead I’m going to write about Jesus.

I hope a bit out of the box.

Jesus had one certain kind of encounter—probably many times—that is recited in the Bible in three places in slightly different forms. Rather than simply quote them here, I’ll tell the

basic story in some probable historical context, knowing that I'm conflating those that are recorded, and that there were probably others similar to those as well.

I want to show how out-of-the-box Jesus' teaching was, how it turned the common wisdom upside down, and how it likely rankled and scandalized many in religious and political power. Though I am now a Christian and a pastor, this will not be a Christian puff piece.

The time of Jesus was a time of great rabbis, Hillel and Shammai most notable among many. Each of these had disciples, students, who listened to every word and tried to live as their rabbi taught. These disciples argued with each other about Scripture and interpretation, and how to live.

Many Christians believe that Scripture is rightly understood just one way, and that it is important to learn and teach that one right way. That's how best to understand God, they believe.

The long Jewish tradition on Scripture is the opposite. It holds that if we do *not* argue, then how do we give God a chance to reveal Himself to us? If we do not wrestle with what is in Scripture and how it applies to our individual lives, if we don't disagree and dispute, how do we give God an opening into our lives to show us what His will is and His purpose is and His truth is—speaking to us through that Scripture? They believe that God would much prefer to have an argument with us than to be ignored by us.

So naturally the disciples of Hillel and Shammai contested with each other, inside and outside of their own groups. Rigorous and often heated debate.

One of the debated issues of the day was which of the commandments in the Bible was the greatest. And it is likely with this ongoing sparring underway that this question was brought to Jesus. He too was a respected rabbi with disciples, well-known, popular, a worker-of-miracles and maybe even the Messiah.

Remember that the Christian-Jewish divide had not yet occurred (and didn't because of Jesus but rather because of Bar Kochba one hundred years later, but that's another story). The circumstances are all Jewish. The debaters are all Jewish. The traditions and Scripture are all Jewish.

So, Rabbi Jesus, which is the greatest commandment?

His response starts off well:

The first and greatest commandment is this, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind."

One side might have cheered for this. There were other candidates: "Have no other gods before me." "Do not covet." "Go forth and subdue the earth." Any of these or others could be easily argued as foundational, first, the greatest. But Jesus picks this one, from Deuteronomy:

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 ⁴ Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! ⁵ And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶ And these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; ⁷

and you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. ⁸ And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. ⁹ And you shall write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates.

It is a great choice. It follows the *Shema* (shə-mä'): "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!"—which is still proclaimed by Jews worldwide today, and it is followed by instructions to teach it to children, and even to physically bind it to forehead and arm, and put it on doorposts. This too is done worldwide to this day.

So Jesus chose well, and those who heard him likely nodded appreciatively. But then he started to talk seditiously:

And the second is like it, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments depend all the Law and the prophets.

Now the nodding has probably stopped and faces are getting puzzled and then red. The first makes sense. After all, it follows the *Shema*. It is repeated many times in Scripture. But the second is plucked from the middle of the book of Leviticus, along with commands about breeding cattle, slander, justice and false testimony—all important in their own right—but this one is "like the first?" Blasphemy! And upon these two, together, depend all the Law and the prophets? Scandal! Jesus is basically saying that everything Jews believe about God's Law—and those who speak for him (the prophets) —are under these two?

This is an equivalence that was more than stunning, it was outrageous. The Source of Everything and “be nice.” The same? And both more important than everything else?

One of the listeners, a lawyer, doesn't miss a beat (remember they all knew how to argue well, and considered it a holy endeavor). He pushes back at Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” You can almost hear the “who” stretched out, and the edge in his voice.

Not trouble enough? Now comes the *coup de grâce*: Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan. The story is perhaps overly familiar to us, and we miss its offensive punch. A Jewish man is traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. He is robbed and nearly beaten to death and left at the side of the road. A Jewish priest sees but avoids him. A Levite (also Jewish) does the same. Then a Samaritan sees him, has compassion, bandages him up, takes him to an inn and pays for him to stay and be cared for until he recovers (no hospitals in those days).

Jesus then asks the lawyer: “Which of the three proved to be a neighbor?” He answers, “The one who showed mercy.” Jesus says, “Go and do the same.”

This was likely a moment of profound awakening or angry recriminations for those present—because the Samaritans were despised. They were considered ritually unclean half-breeds who worshipped God in the wrong place and in the wrong way. The favor was returned: the Samaritans despised the Jews.

Pick a place on the planet today where neighboring tribes,

countries or religious groups hate each other, where they are bitter enemies. That is the kind of example Jesus chose for his story. It was repulsive, hideous, despicable. It confronted and rejected all of the vocal self-righteousness about neighbor and enemy, us and them.

Moreover, Jesus also said we are to love our enemies and pray for them, and that it is nothing special if we just love those who love us. Anybody can do that. But rather, because the love of God falls on all, not just on those whom He approves, we are to love everyone in this same way.

There is a bit more here even than this, as pithy and out-of-the-box as it was and is already. The word for love, in both Hebrew (אהב, *'ahab* in Leviticus) and Greek (ἀγαπάω, *agapao* in Matthew), doesn't just mean "warm feelings," though it can include that.

Rather, the idea in context is action for the well-being of another. Charity. Care. Support. Effort. Expenditure. Crossing the divide to bring healing, and intending well-being and productivity even for someone who hates you.

Let's reflect on this. Jesus was not stupid—that's obvious from even the most superficial readings of his exchanges with others. He was not a Pollyanna unable to see true evil. He clearly grew angry at people who cheated others, and even chased some of them with a whip made of rope. He hated hypocrisy, and sharply criticized those in power who used their positions to cheat or burden others. There was nothing artificially sweet about him at all.

Rather, he said what he believed he needed to say and

willingly accepted the consequences, which in the end included being whipped and killed. A stand-up guy, who saw what didn't work and said so, and who saw what needed to be different and said so.

If we apply this to Christians, we see this: Everything Christians believe has to stand under these two commandments. Got your theology right, but deliver it in hurtful and bitter rhetoric? Fails the test. Got your Scripture quotes down pat, but use them to manipulate or shame others? Fails the test. Got your economic theory, political ambitions and military capabilities all lined up, and use them to dominate and take advantage of others? Fails the test. Obviously, we Christians have failed the test again and again over the course of two thousand years. We still are failing the test. But we still have the counsel, the teaching, the wisdom. We could start to apply it today.

What about its application to the world, not just the Christian subculture? What if this out-of-the-box approach were thoughtfully (not naïvely) and methodically applied to real current enemies, personal or regional?

For example (as one of hundreds of obvious opportunities in the world) what if the Prime Minister of Israel announced that his country intended not just to allow the Palestinians land and self-government (while protecting the safety of the Israeli people), but that Israel would now dedicate itself to their well-being? Would give real help with construction, water, farming, health, education? Would take action for the well-being of others, especially those called "enemy"?

Name the conflict, the combatants, the location, then think

of a new way to a new conclusion, more than the simple “win-win” of negotiations, more than discussing enough to know enough to have better strategy (John Nash), more than brilliant manipulation (Machiavelli), more than an eye for an eye (equity, not revenge), more than *The Art of War*, but rather an intentional strategy to improve an enemy’s well-being. That revolutionary approach is implicit and explicit in what Jesus said and did.

Consider this: In simple economic terms, effort spent on conflict and war does not normatively add to the net wealth of humankind (even factoring in technology advancements and other byproducts). Effort spent to make others productive (for their well-being) *does* increase the net wealth of humankind.

This love-as-action is a command that Jesus put on a par with the command to love God, and He said everything else must be under these two.

Regardless of who any of us believe Jesus was (or is), this is an insight that could change the world— if we would grasp it, and be wise and intentional about applying it.

I pray that it may be so. (Or, said in Hebrew and Greek: “Amen.”)

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