

We're going to play a little game for a moment. I'll say a slogan; you guess the company to which I am referring.

"Just do it."

Nike.

"There are some things money can't buy. For everything else, there's _____."

MasterCard.

"Put the tiger in your tank."

Exxon

"The Quicker, picker upper."

Bounty

Reaching back to the 1980s: "Reach out and touch someone."

AT&T.

Now this: "JOY: Jesus first. Others second. You last."

The Church. You. Me. All of us.

You may not be as familiar with this one, but it's one of those well-worn Vacation Bible School or Sunday School phrases. One might call it the unofficial phrase of 21st-century American Christianity. The idea behind it is that if you call yourself a Christian then God and everyone else comes first. Anything else is just plain selfish. On the surface, that idea seems to right along with what Jesus says are the two most important commandments: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind...love your neighbor as yourself."

Truth be told, most people excel at the first part of that second command: love your neighbor. If not, they at least feel compelled to pretend they aim for the first part. Both Christianity and society have taken to heart Jesus' words that "to whom much is given, much is required," because the last thing anyone wants to be accused of is being selfishness. So, in the name of being a "good Christian," you help. You rescue. You fix. Over and over and over. Even if you're exhausted or burned out. Even if you are resentful. While that is a noble idea, it is not the Gospel. It's altruism, a 19th century philosophy often confused with Gospel. Altruism says that "in order to love others more, you need to love yourself less." You exist solely for others.¹

¹ Samuel Wells, *Be Not Afraid: Facing Fear with Faith* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011), 189.

But what about the second part of Jesus' commandment to love others **as you love yourself**? Because it turns out that you cannot love God or your neighbors fully until you first love yourself fully. And, you cannot love yourself fully until you first know that Jesus Christ loves you. And not just know it, but make sense of your entire life through the lens of Jesus' radical love—and **only** through that love.

Why?

...Because this love is not predicated on your looks, your abilities, your achievements, your record, or anything else but your reflection of God's image. It is the only thing that never runs dry because it comes from eternal source. This love is the force behind the advent of creation and is the love that started a revolution that led to the death of God's human self because it challenged the status quo of the human economy. It "understands the fear that makes you cruel and the joy that makes you generous. It rejoices in the very thrill of your existence [and] is tender and close to you when you are curved in on yourself... [It] is overjoyed at the very moment you return [no matter how many times you may have left and] is exultant as you spread your wings to fly in his Spirit."² Loving yourself is not simply treating yourself to something nice every so often or even celebrating your accomplishments short of God's Spirit working through you. Nor is it akin to "liking" yourself or thinking you're pretty darn decent. Loving yourself is looking at and sharing ask that Jesus Christ has done for all of us so that business-as-usual can have a temporary influence but no staying power.

Until you see your being, your worth, and your purpose through that love, your limitations and foibles will have the power to convince you life is a treadmill of self-improvement in the name of being good enough, relevant enough, and needed enough (just as society tells us and we too often don't realize we believe). Denying your identity in this love can cause you to look at your body and believe that you are only as beautiful or useful as your wrinkles and muscles permit. (A \$9 bottle of Oil of Olay or Botox can only do so much for so long). Until you see that you are enough, the Gospel of Jesus Christ will be just another ideal to admire from a distance, and your neighbors will remain potential threats to your satisfaction and not the very image of God. As theologian Sam Wells writes, "You are what Jesus thinks of you, because Jesus is God" and God is *your* God. Did you catch that? *Your* God. "This isn't a distant abstract God who set the universe in motion and then took a long lunch break. Your God means the God who shaped his whole life to be in relationship with you, not just in the good times but when you've completely messed up and when it's

² Ibid., 191.

all shocking, embarrassing, humiliating and sad.”³ God knows you inside and out and still loves you. This is not a recipe in healthy self-esteem or self image.

Not seeing and treating yourself with deep, holy longing is mistreating the image and work of God. How can you love a God that you mistreat and then expect to do so to others in the name of God? Your return and seeking of God each day through Jesus Christ is enough.

It’s simple and it’s everything. Why do we complicate it though?

One of the greatest theologians of the last century is a Swiss man named Karl Barth. Over the course of his life, Barth published more than 20 works, including his magnum opus, *Church Dogmatics*, which consists of more than 13 volumes and 9,300 pages and was left unfinished when he died. Despite Barth’s influence and popularity, when someone asked him what he considered to be the “most important truth [he] had learned in [his] theological study” he said what a child might have said: “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”⁴

Of the million words written or read only 12 mattered most.

Through Moses, God gave God’s people 631 commandments. Only two encapsulate the essence of our lives: Love the Lord your God with all that you are and all that you have, and love your neighbor as you love yourself.

In your lifetime, you will engage in millions of conversations. You will hear hundreds of thousands of songs, sermons, and speeches. You will watch tens of thousands of television ads. You will read hundreds of books.

Only a few have the power to transform your life. For ever.

Which ones will they be?

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³ Ibid., 193.

⁴ Karl Barth quoted in Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 255.