

# Giving up goodness for Jesus

*A sermon on 1 Peter 3: 13-22 & John 14: 15-21 by Nathan Nettleton, 21 May 2017*

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## Message

Following Jesus has nothing to do with trying to be good. His love and hope are gifts, rather than demands, and they free us to love and hope freely.

## Sermon

Probably the most widespread misunderstanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus is that it is all about improving our behaviour and conforming to a set of moral standards. Or in brief, that it is all about 'being good'. Although very widely believed, this is complete rubbish.

The belief that it is about being good frequently mutates into a belief that it is also about getting other people to be good, and when it does that, it frequently becomes not only judgemental, but violent and oppressive, as we try to impose our moral standards on the rest of the world by policing and punishing bad behaviour.

This is, of course, true of many religious systems, not just Christianity. Just this week there has been news of two young men in Aceh being sentenced to caning for homosexual love-making. Although in that case, the religion driving it was not Christianity, Christian history is littered with examples of the exact same sort of violent repressive moral crusading.

The call to follow Jesus is not a call to concentrate on being good. In fact, if it has anything at all to do with being good, it is probably more like a call to give up trying to be good, to just forget about it and put your attention elsewhere. Indeed, if people really 'get it' when they begin following Jesus, they will probably be a whole lot less concerned about being good than they were before.

Possibly the second most widespread misunderstanding is that it is all about believing in things that are not easy to believe in, but in fact, those who really 'get it' are probably not much concerned about trying to believe things either.

Now if that all sounds a bit surprising, or even a bit heretical, don't panic. You're not alone. These things I'm calling misunderstandings are so widespread as to be almost regarded as common knowledge. And one of the problems with common knowledge is that it is so taken for granted that it colours the way we read the Bible, and we see this common knowledge confirmed there even when it isn't. Only by deliberately questioning it can we have a hope of seeing past it and perhaps deconstructing it enough to see the truth.

The gospel reading we heard tonight is a case in point. If you assume that following Jesus is about living up to a code of conduct, then this passage can easily reinforce that view. Jesus says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments," and then a few verses later he says, "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me." Seems clear enough, doesn't it? That's the common knowledge. If you want to be one of those who loves and follows Jesus, then you'd better knuckle down, grit your teeth, and keep those commandments. Presumably all of them. And if that's not a moral code, a strict focus on being good, then what is?

Well, actually, it doesn't say that at all. It doesn't say that if you love Jesus you need to prove it by working very hard at keeping the commandments. It just says that if you love Jesus, then keeping the commandments is something that will happen, something that will more or less take care of itself. And of course, elsewhere when Jesus is asked to sum up the commandments that really matter, he says they come down to this, love and love. Love God, and love one another, even your enemies and other people that no one expects you to love. And for good measure, he adds that everything else in the law and the prophets really comes down to those two things anyway, love and love.

The trouble is that under the influence of this sneaky 'common knowledge', that doesn't necessarily get us out of our bind, because love can just become one more thing that we have to knuckle down, grit out teeth, and try really really hard to do. It just becomes one more standard to try to reach or one more measure of whether we are being good. And of course one more thing to fail at and feel guilty about. Which doesn't much sound like love at all, does it?

The truth is that the capacity to love truly is not something we can work up by dint of effort. It is a gift. And it is a gift that we receive as we find ourselves beloved, and experience that transforming power of being loved deep in our bones. Love comes very naturally when we know we are loved.

Those of you who were here a few years ago before Frances died will remember how easy it was for us to love Frances because we always felt so loved by her. She was a beloved doting grandmother to us all. We never felt like we had to do anything impressive to win her over, or to show her that we were good in order to persuade her to love us. She just loved us, warts and all, just as we were and for who we were. And because we knew she loved us, we found it very very easy and natural to love her. Love was a gift we received, and in receiving it, we were able to share it.

Loving doesn't even feel like a risk when we know ourselves beloved. We can love without fear of rejection. It is quite the opposite of our first experiences of falling in love when we were teenagers. I've had some old memories coming back over recent years as my daughter has told me about things going on among her teenage friends. One person sends friends to find out how another person feels about them before risking any sort of approach themselves. If you find out that the other person is smitten with you, then suddenly it becomes a whole lot safer to make a move. If you can't get any information, it remains terrifying.

Knowing ourselves beloved is a wondrous gift that makes us feel assured and bold and ready to take on the world. When we know ourselves deeply and totally loved, just for who we are and regardless of anything we do, we fill to overflowing with love and find ourselves giving ourselves away in love for those around us. We can give ourselves with reckless abandon because we don't have to hoard love or desperately cling to love because it keeps coming to us unceasingly. And of course, if we are loving generously and boldly, and love is the sum of the commandments, then being good will take care of itself as love flows freely.

That doesn't mean we won't get hurt. No one who follows Jesus and sees where he has gone could be under any illusion that there is no pain on the pathway he has taken. But those who know that no amount of pain or rejection or even violence can separate them from the love of God are much more able to stand firm when the forces of hostility and hatred do their worst.

Our reading from the first letter of Peter spoke of the likelihood of such suffering, and called on us not to fear and not to be intimidated, but to stand firm in ‘the hope that is in us.’

Often though, hope is another one of those things we think we have to grit our teeth and try hard at. Either that or we think of it as nothing much more than wishful thinking. The kind of hope the Apostle is talking about is not like wishful thinking at all, and nor is it something we have to try hard to generate. It is a gift too. Hope is the spirit in which you are able to face the future when you know what is coming to you and you know that it is wonderful.

One of my favourite literary classics is *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and there is a scene in it where two men are being led into a public square to be rather gruesomely executed. But they walk with completely different demeanours, because one of them knows that the Count has intervened on his behalf and that at any moment, the courier will arrive with the order to pardon and release him. The other may, of course, harbour some wishful thinking that somehow he might be pardoned, but no amount of wishful thinking can give him any confidence with which to face the future.

Hope is not wishful thinking. Hope is the confidence of the man who knows that even though he is still a prisoner at this moment, his release has already been secured. The hope the Apostle talks about is the confidence of knowing that Christ has already defeated the forces of hostility and death. We are not vaguely wishing he might. We know he already has, even if the news of his victory hasn’t reached everybody yet.

We know he has because he continues to live and to love freely and generously, even though humanity did its best to destroy him completely. We sought to snuff out his love and hope by putting him in the place where we thought all love and hope were extinguished, the place of utter rejection and humiliation and shame and death.

Society always has someone it has turned on and cast into that place. It’s what we do when we are anxiously trying to prove ourselves good – we label someone else as evil so that its clear that evil is them, not us – and we cast them into that horrible place of utter rejection, aloneness and death. That’s what was being done to the two young men in Aceh this week. So much of our desperate striving to measure up and be good are our fearful attempt to avoid being cast into that place.

But Jesus stepped up and allowed us to cast him into that place we most feared, that place we thought was absolute annihilation, and then he shocked us all by emerging three days later, scarred but more alive than ever, and if anything, even more full to overflowing with love and mercy and grace than before.

In our reading, Peter describes him as having descended to the dead, only to proclaim the good news to the prisoners there, that same good news of release for the prisoners he had been preaching all along. And then emerging to new life, like Noah from the ark.

So now, that place we so feared has been exposed as having no real power other than the power that fear gave it. Jesus has shown that it is not so lethal after all. He calls us to follow him, to know ourselves beloved and to boldly live as he lived and love as he loved, knowing that the worst that can possibly happen to us has already been shown to be perfectly survivable and not the least bit capable of removing us from either the love or the life of God.

So now Jesus is not the least bit interested in us trying to be good. Human attempts to try to make ourselves good usually end up labelling someone else as evil and victimising them because if they are the evil ones, then we must be the good and we'll be safe. And Jesus showed us that such desperation even ends up victimising him, the most perfect embodiment of love that the world has ever seen, so the whole goodness project is a sick failure.

Trying to define and secure goodness for ourselves ends up destroying love itself. What Jesus does want us to do is follow him deep into the experience of the love of God, into the place where we will know ourselves so completely and utterly and unconditionally loved that we will be full to overflowing with love ourselves and set free to love others recklessly without even needing them to reciprocate it or validate us in any way.

Jesus wants us to follow him into a love and hope that are ours entirely as gifts, unearned, undeserved, but freely given and totally transforming. And if we will follow the crucified and risen Jesus into that promised land, goodness, though abandoned and forgotten, will take care of itself and be born again as love, love and more love.