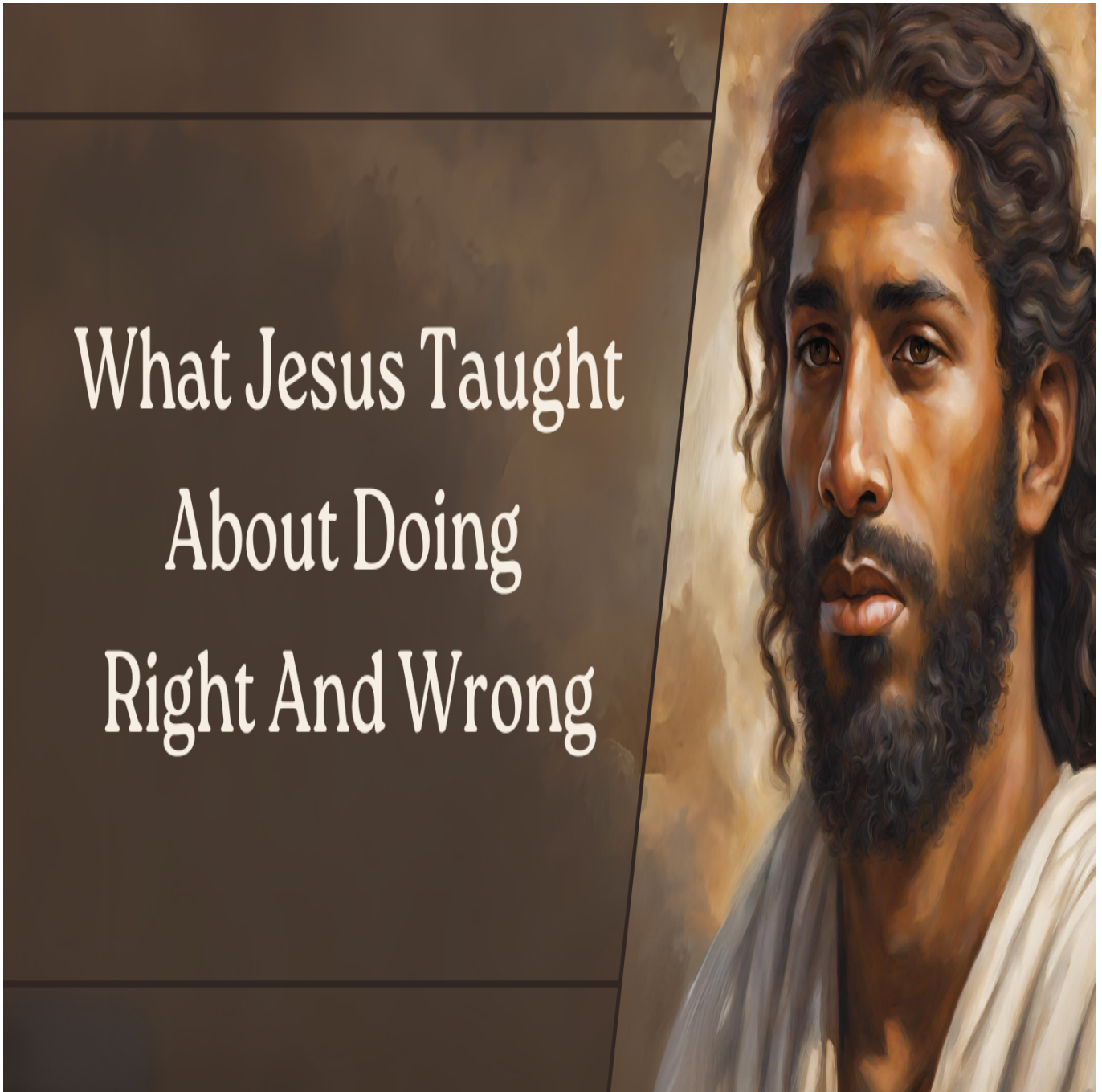


# What Jesus Taught About Doing Right And Wrong

## Description



by [Trent Wilde](#) Written May-June 2024

What Jesus taught about doing right and wrong is quite simple, yet it is not often understood. He straightforwardly stated the importance of the subject, yet the moral principles he explained are

barely ever discussed. All Christians recognize that Jesus is our Savior from sin, yet what that means is far from agreed upon. Furthermore, it doesn't often take into account Jesus' own teaching about sin and righteousness.

Should we do right and avoid doing wrong? Most would say, "Yes!" And, as we'll see, Jesus, of course, agreed with this. But let's take this further. Is it *possible* to do right and to avoid doing wrong *consistently*? Here, most would say that this is impossible, at least while existing in mortal, sin-affected bodies. Is it *necessary* to do right and to avoid doing wrong in order to gain everlasting life? Many are uneasy at a question like this. On one hand, salvation by works is clearly a "No." On the other hand, most know it doesn't make sense to say people can do whatever they want, no matter how sinful, and still expect to receive eternal life.

As we'll see in this article, the common Christian answers to these last two questions have little to do with Jesus' own teachings. What Jesus taught about doing right and wrong is either ignored, watered down, or subordinated to later developments in Christian theology.

The goal of this article is to lay out, in simple terms, Jesus' teachings on practical morality as found in the Gospels. And we'll see that his teachings provide straightforward answers to questions like: "Is it possible to consistently do right and avoid wrong?" "Is it necessary to do right and avoid wrong in order to be granted everlasting life?" and "What is the means by which one can overcome wrongdoing and succeed at implementing rightdoing?"

Since many Christians have the idea that our works are of secondary importance (at best) when it comes to matters of eternal consequence, we'll start by showing that Jesus stressed the importance of actually *doing* right and avoiding *doing* wrong.

## Jesus' Emphasis on Practical Morality

### Jesus Continued John the Baptist's Teaching About Repentance

1 "In those days, John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, 2 "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!" . . . 8 "Therefore produce fruit worthy of repentance! 9 "Don't think to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father,' for I tell you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. 10 "Even now the ax lies at the root of the trees. Therefore every tree that doesn't produce good fruit is cut down, and cast into the fire." . . . 13 "Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by him. . . . 4:12 "Now when Jesus heard that John was delivered up, he withdrew into Galilee. . . . 17 "From that time, Jesus began to preach, and to say, "Repent! For the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand."— *The Gospel of Matthew* 3:1-2, 8-10; 4:12, 17 [All Scripture quotations from The World English Bible.](#)

Comment: There are a few things to take note of relative to this passage.

First, John the Baptist called people to repent. Repentance is returning to devotion to God; it is turning from sin to righteousness (Ezekiel 18:30; Acts 3:19).

Second, John's teaching regarding repentance is explicitly related to practical deeds. This is clear from his injunction to "produce fruit" worthy of repentance. He warned that his hearers would be mistaken to take refuge in their association with Abraham. Their national identity and religious profession meant nothing if they didn't have the fruits of righteousness to evidence their genuine repentance.

Third, those who failed to produce good fruit would be cut down. Clearly, this presents good works as something much more than "optional." The absence of good works would result in forfeiting participation in God's Kingdom.

Fourth, Jesus continued to teach John's message of repentance. This is plain in the passage quoted above, but also from other statements of Jesus. For example, in Matthew 7:17-19, he is even recorded as saying, "every good tree produces good fruit, but the corrupt tree produces evil fruit. A good tree can't produce evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree produce good fruit. Every tree that doesn't grow good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." This is unmistakably John's teaching continued by Jesus.

### **Jesus Valued Obedience to God More Than Association With Himself**

31 [Jesus'] mother and his brothers came, and standing outside, they sent to him, calling him. 32 A multitude was sitting around him, and they told him, "Behold, your mother, your brothers, and your sisters are outside looking for you."

33 He answered them, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" 34 Looking around at those who sat around him, he said, "Behold, my mother and my brothers! 35 For whoever does the will of God is my brother, my sister, and mother." –*The Gospel of Mark 3:31-35*

Comment: Earlier in this passage, we learn that Jesus' family thought he was insane (Mark 3:21), making it evident that they weren't on board with his mission—a fact also mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament (John 7:5). As such, they weren't obeying the word of God that Jesus himself was delivering. Strikingly, the fact that they weren't "doing" the will of God but instead acted in opposition to his work was weighty enough to warrant no longer recognizing them as part of his "true" family. According to Jesus, to be part of his "true" family requires "doing" the will of God. Notice, the decisive factor isn't "professing" to believe in God or "accepting" the idea that Jesus is the Savior of the world. What warrants one to be recognized as part of Jesus' family is "doing" God's will. This is also stated in the following passage.

27Â It came to pass, as he said these things, a certain woman out of the multitude lifted up her voice and said to him, â??Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts which nursed you!â?•

28 But he said, â??On the contrary, blessed are those who hear the word of God, and keep it.â?• –Â*The Gospel of Luke*Â 11:27-28

Comment: Not merely *hearing* God's word but *doing* it is what Jesus considered blessable. The next passage further explains this distinction.

### **To Hear and *Do* vs To Hear and *Not Do***

46Â â??Why do you call me, â??Lord, Lord,â?? and donâ??t do the things which I say?  
47Â Everyone who comes to me, and hears my words and does them, I will show you who he is like. 48Â He is like a man building a house, who dug and went deep and laid a foundation on the rock. When a flood arose, the stream broke against that house, and could not shake it, because it was founded on the rock. 49Â But he who hears and doesnâ??t do, is like a man who built a house on the earth without a foundation, against which the stream broke, and immediately it fell; and the ruin of that house was great.â?• –Â*The Gospel of Luke* 6:46-49

Comment: Plainly, the difference between the two men in Jesus' illustration is that oneÂ *did* what he heard, while the otherÂ *didn't do* what he heard. To actually act out in practical works the teachings of Jesus is portrayed by him as a matter of great consequence. And notice, those who don't do what they hear Jesus say aren't only those who overtly oppose him, but they include those who call him "Lord." In fact, from the introduction to the illustration, it's clear that the hearers Jesus primarily had in mind are those who acknowledge him as Lord! So while Christians often give 'accepting Jesus as Lord' priority over works, Jesus himself gave works priority over this acknowledgement.

### **Curing (Not Reconceptualizing) Sinners**

15 ...many tax collectors and sinners sat down with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many, and they followed him. 16 The scribes and the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with the sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, â??Why is it that he eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners?â?•

17 When Jesus heard it, he said to them, â??Those who are healthy have no need for a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.â?• –Â*The Gospel of Mark*Â 2:15-17

Comment: The analogy between Jesus' work for sinners and physicians' work for the ill would be rather odd if what he had in mind was that the sinners would continue sinning while he would ensure that God would now look at them as though they were righteous. A doctor who would hide

disease rather than heal it should be ousted, not honored. The plain meaning of Jesus' analogy is that he intends to heal sinners of their practice of sinning. He would produce a change in the sinner, not merely a change in how God regards them. This is further confirmed by the fact that his explanation of what it means to treat the sinners is to call them to repentance, which we have already shown to be a practical turning from wrongdoing to rightdoing. The sort of healing Jesus granted to those suffering from various bodily infirmities was a real, practical healing. Surely his work of healing people from sin would be no less real and practical.

### **Keep The Commandments to Inherit Eternal Life**

16 Behold, one came to him and said, "Good teacher, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?"•

17 He said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but one, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments."•

18 He said to him, "Which ones?"•

Jesus said, "You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not offer false testimony. 19 Honor your father and your mother. And, You shall love your neighbor as yourself."• – *The Gospel of Matthew* 19:16-19

Comment: We'll return to this saying and its fuller context in a future section, but for our present focus it's worth noting that Jesus straightforwardly declares that keeping the commandments is a condition for gaining eternal life. The specific commands listed include both *doing* right deeds and *avoiding* wrong deeds. It should be uncontroversial, then, that Jesus taught that our works—our literal actions of doing right or wrong—are of great consequence for our eternal welfare. Keeping the commandments fits a person to inherit eternal life while disobeying them would naturally unfit a person for eternal life.

### **If You Believe and Love Jesus, You Will Do His Works**

12 Most certainly I tell you, he who believes in me, the works that I do, he will do also; and he will do greater works than these, because I am going to my Father.

•

15 If you love me, keep my commandments.

•

21 One who has my commandments and keeps them, that person is one who loves me.

•

23 Jesus answered him, "If a man loves me, he will keep my word.

...

24 He who doesn't love me doesn't keep my words. – *The Gospel of John* 14:12, 15, 21, 23, 24

Comment: It is as though these words were uttered and written deliberately to disabuse people of

the notion that Jesus accepts belief in him without the practical *doing* of his *works*.<sup>16</sup> And it is equally well-designed to repudiate the idea that he condones sentimental attachment to him that isn't grounded in the implementation of the principles advocated in his words and commands.

All this to say, even though many Christians keep clear of stressing the importance of practical right-doing and wrong-shooing, Jesus didn't. He made it plain that working righteous works and turning from (forsaking) unrighteous works is of greater importance than merely hearing his words. It is more important than national or religious associations with God's people; more important than associating ourselves with him on the basis of family or even religious profession (acknowledging him as Lord). He made it clear that he intends to heal sinners from their sinning and that repentance from sin and keeping God's commandments is a prerequisite for enjoying eternal life in God's Kingdom. He declared that if we truly believe him and love him, we will keep his words and work his works.

## What Jesus Taught About Our Potential for Moral Perfection

In this section, we'll examine Jesus' teachings regarding the standard of moral character that is possible for us to attain and carry out in practice. As his statements make plain, he taught that it is indeed possible to consistently do right and avoid doing wrong. There is no hint in his teachings that moral perfection is impossible or that it is a standard reserved for the hereafter. On the contrary, the moral standard he called people to is so high (reaching even to heaven) that it is generally deemed impossible to attain. Indeed, Jesus himself said it is impossible *of ourselves*, but granting this, he immediately showed that this inability need not be a barrier to moral perfection by declaring that what is impossible with man is possible with God.

Even though we didn't point it out earlier, Jesus' statements we considered in the previous section already furnish us with evidence that he advocated the possibility of, and potential for, moral perfection. So, let's start with some of those statements.

### John-The-Baptist Style Repentance<sup>17</sup>No More Bad Fruit

<sup>17</sup> From that time, Jesus began to preach, and to say, "Repent! For the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand."<sup>16</sup> . . .<sup>16</sup> By their fruits you will know them. Do you gather grapes from thorns or figs from thistles? <sup>17</sup> Even so, every good tree produces good fruit, but the corrupt tree produces evil fruit. <sup>18</sup> A good tree can't produce evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree produce good fruit. – *The Gospel of Matthew* 4:17; 7:16-18

43 “For there is no good tree that produces rotten fruit, nor again a rotten tree that produces good fruit. 44 For each tree is known by its own fruit. — *The Gospel of Luke* 6:43-44

Comment: As we showed earlier, while these teachings were spoken by Jesus, they were first proclaimed by John the Baptist. As such, they were part of Jesus’ message from the very beginning of his ministry. And as you can see, it is a serious call to repentance—a call for people to turn from sin and produce instead the good fruits of righteousness. It stands to reason that Jesus wouldn’t spend his time and energies calling people to turn from sin unless he thought such a thing were possible. The fact that he taught such a message demands that he thought it is possible to be a good tree and as such, he thought it was possible to cease producing bad fruit and produce instead only good. And please do take note of the fact that his statements indicate that a good tree (a good person) produces *no bad fruit* (no bad works). Again, he said, “a good tree can’t produce evil fruit” and “there is no good tree that produces rotten fruit, nor again a rotten tree that produces good fruit.” Thus, according to Jesus, it truly is an either/or situation. In fact, he said, “Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree corrupt and its fruit corrupt; for the tree is known by its fruit.” (Matthew 12:33) If a tree could produce both good and bad fruit, then you couldn’t know the tree by its fruits. But according to Jesus, you can know a tree by its fruits, and therefore, it must be the case that a tree doesn’t produce both good and bad fruit.

To make things as unambiguous as possible, the simple truth of Jesus’ teaching regarding the good and bad trees and their fruit is that it is possible, and imperative, to be a person who does only what is right and who avoids doing any wrong. He didn’t urge people to remain the same overall sort of person (the same kind of tree); he urged them to become a different kind of person (a good tree, not a bad tree). He didn’t teach that we can’t help but produce both good and bad fruit; he insisted that we must bring forth only one or the other. The standard isn’t less bad fruit, it’s no bad fruit. He also didn’t say that one can continue to produce bad fruit and be declared a good tree regardless, or that God would look at the tree as if it was good even while it bore bad fruit. No! Jesus taught that the fruit reflects the character of the tree. We can and must become good trees, and we can and must produce good fruit and *only good fruit without any bad fruit*. This is Jesus’ teaching about what is possible for our moral character and behavior: an undeviating doing of right and avoidance of wrong.

### **It’s Possible With God**

17 As he was going out into the way, one ran to him, knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?”•

18 Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except one—God. 19 You know the commandments: “Do not murder,” “Do not commit adultery,” “Do not steal,” “Do not give false testimony,” “Do not defraud,” “Honor your father and mother.”•

20 He said to him, “Teacher, I have observed all these things from my youth.”•

21 Jesus looking at him loved him, and said to him, “One thing you lack. Go, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come,

follow me, taking up the cross.â?•

22 But his face fell at that saying, and he went away sorrowful, for he was one who had great possessions.

23 Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, â??How difficult it is for those who have riches to enter into Godâ??s Kingdom!â?•

24 The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus answered again, â??Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter into Godâ??s Kingdom! 25 It is easier for a camel to go through a needleâ??s eye than for a rich man to enter into Godâ??s Kingdom.â?•

26 They were exceedingly astonished, saying to him, â??Then who can be saved?â?•

27 Jesus, looking at them, said, â??With men it is impossible, but not with God, for all things are possible with God.â?• –*The Gospel of Mark* 10:17-27

Comment: What is our moral potential according to Jesus here? As we noted earlier, Jesus didn't hesitate to uphold *doing* God's commandments as a condition for entering God's Kingdom and receiving everlasting life. And the doing of these commandments, according to Jesus, can't be partial. The rich man said he had kept the commandments that Jesus listed. Jesus' response was, "One thing you lack." This one thing was enough to keep this man out of the kingdom. By saying, "Go, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven," Jesus clearly indicated that the rich man wouldn't have treasure in heaven so long as he failed to do this "one thing" he lacked. The man could have objected, "It is only one thing! No one is perfect!" But Jesus demanded moral perfection. Nothing could be held back. Whoever would follow him has to take up their crossâ??which is to be willing even to be crucified. Elsewhere Jesus said, "Whoever wants to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.Â For whoever wants to save his life will lose it; and whoever will lose his life for my sake and the sake of the Good News will save it." (Mark 8:34-35). Jesus and the good news (his messageâ??the truth he proclaimed) must be cherished more than life itself. This allows for no retention of selfishness and no retention of sin. Those who continue to hold on to even one thing more highly than truth cannot enter God's kingdom. One can no more enter the kingdom with "one thing" morally defective than a camel can go through the eye of a needle.

The disciples were shocked at Jesus' words. If entering God's Kingdom requires living up to a moral standard that can't tolerate a lack of moral integrity in even one thing, who could possibly be saved? Here, Jesus holds forth hope. While one sin is enough to keep someone out of the Kingdom, he says it *is* possible to be saved with God. Let's make sure there is no mistake on this point. By saying, "with men it is impossible, but not with God," Jesus wasn't saying, "Psych! Everything I just said about moral perfection as a condition for entering God's Kingdom doesn't really apply because God has made it possible to enter His Kingdom without stopping sinning after all!" It should be obvious that this wasn't his point. Jesus didn't run after the rich man and tell him that he can retain his riches and still be savedâ??that God has made it possible for him to inherit eternal life while still lacking his "one thing." No! Jesus' message isn't that God allows us to circumvent the requirement for moral perfection; it is that God enables us to satisfy the requirement for moral perfection. Saying it is possible to be saved with God isn't saying it is possible to be saved with sin. Jesus' point is that even though we can't meet the high standard of moral perfection in our own strength, God can enable us to meet the standard and thus be fitted to enter His Kingdom. Through depending on God and learning His ways as revealed in the gospel, one can give up every vestige of selfishness and render perfect obedience to His commandments, which is to do right and avoid doing wrong without deviation (to produce only good fruit with no



bad fruit).

### **Our Works Can and Should Be As Jesus' Works**

12 Most certainly I tell you, he who believes in me, the works that I do, he will do also; and he will do greater works than these, because I am going to my Father. – *The Gospel of John* 14:12

Comment: This is the last of the texts from the previous section that we'll consider. The plain idea here is that those who believe in Jesus will do his works. This tells us something not only about Jesus' concern that his followers put moral principles into practice, but also about the heights of moral behavior to which we might attain. Far from suggesting that Jesus had a degree of moral perfection that's beyond what the rest of us could hope for, Jesus here places squarely within our reach the capacity of doing his works and even going beyond them! About himself, Jesus said,

“the prince of the world comes, and he has nothing in me.” (John 14:30)

“as the Father commanded me, even so I do...” (John 14:31)

“I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love.” (John 15:10)

and,

“Which of you convicts me of sin?” (John 8:46)

All of these statements have the potential to be true of a follower of Jesus, so long as that follower internalizes and puts into practice Jesus' words. Remember, he said, “he who believes in me, the works that I do, he will do also.” This is just a little before saying what he did concerning himself in John 14:30-31. And his full statement in which he said, “I have kept my Father's commandments,” is, “If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, even as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love” (John 15:10). And a little before saying, “Which of you convicts me of sin?” (implying he didn't sin), he said, “Most certainly I tell you, everyone who commits sin is the bondservant of sin” (John 8:34). The obvious implication is that if one is to no longer be a bondservant of sin, that one can no longer continue to commit sin. So, is it possible for one to cease being a bondservant of sin? To this, Jesus says, “If therefore the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.” (John 8:36) Decidedly, then, Jesus not only claims freedom from sin for himself, but he also claims the ability to set his followers free from sin. And, as if to make certain that he isn't speaking of a nominal (name-only) freedom, but of a practical reality, he doesn't merely say, “the Son will make you free” but adds, “you will be free indeed.” By saying “you” he emphasizes that the freedom from sin he speaks of is a freedom that is actually experienced by the individual. And by saying, “indeed,” he emphasizes that it is to be a matter of fact—not an illusion and not merely a legal status. In other words, Jesus can set someone free from sin so that they no longer commit it and so no one will be able to convict them of sin, just as they could not convict Jesus of sin.

Jesus also said, “He who follows me will *not walk in the darkness*, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). And, “This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light, for their *works* were evil. For everyone who *does* evil hates the light and doesn't come to the light, lest his *works* would be exposed. But he who *does* the truth comes to the light, that his *works* may be revealed, *that they have been done in God*” (John 3:19-21). Mark what these words convey: To follow Jesus is to *not walk* in darkness—to *not do* evil—to *not* have evil *works*; it is to *do* the truth—to have *works* that can be *revealed* as

having been *done in God*, just like Jesus' works are done in God. And we should all know what this means—complete obedience to His Father without deviation:

*“I do nothing of myself, but as my Father taught me”* (John 8:28)

*“the Son can do nothing of himself, but what he sees the Father doing.”* (John 5:19)

May those who follow Jesus do the same: doing nothing of themselves but bearing all their fruit (all their works) *in him*.

*“Remain in me, and I in you. As the branch can't bear fruit by itself unless it remains in the vine, so neither can you, unless you remain in me. I am the vine. You are the branches. He who remains in me and I in him bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”* (John 15:4-5)

Notice that Jesus said the same thing concerning his followers in relation to himself as he said concerning himself in relation to his Father. It should thus be evident that we should understand both sayings in the same way. For Jesus, it is granted that these expressions not only reveal his utter dependence on his Father but also the fact that his living in full dependence on his Father entails that he never acted independently of his Father—he never acted contrary to his Father's will. Jesus' application of the same language to his followers makes plain that the same can and should be true of them; they can and should be utterly dependent on Jesus and thus never act independently of him—never act contrary to his will.

### **Sin No More**

14 Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, “Behold, you are made well. Sin no more, so that nothing worse happens to you.”—*The Gospel of John* 5:14

11 ... Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way. From now on, sin no more.”—*The Gospel of John* 8:11

Comment: Jesus doesn't say, “From now on, sin isn't accounted to you,” nor does he say, “Sin less often” or “Commit *certain sins* no more.” His statement is plain: “Sin no more.” If, after hearing this statement, a person chose to sin even once more, would they be obeying Jesus' command? The straightforward answer is no. To sin again would be to sin more, not to “sin no more.” The fact that Jesus told people to “sin no more” entails that he believed that it's possible for people to live without continuing to sin. Jesus' injunction to “sin no more” is so simple and so plainly in favor of the idea that we can live without sinning, that his teaching on the subject should be unmistakable.

### **You Can't Serve Two Masters**

13 No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other; or else he will hold to one and despise the other. You aren't able to serve God and

Mammon.â?• –*The Gospel of Luke 16:13*

Comment: As we saw earlier, “everyone who commits sin is the bondservant of sinâ?• (John 8:34). Since one cannot serve two masters and one who sins is a servant of sin, the conclusion is unavoidable that one who sins isn’t a servant of God. To be a servant of God, then, entails no longer being a servant of sin, which means no longer committing sin. Just like with the good and bad fruit, this is an either/or situation; serving God cannot be mixed with serving sin. None will deny that Jesus advocated serving God, but for this to mean much, we need to understand this in light of his own teaching regarding what it means to serve Godâ??unreserved and undeviating obedience with no intermixture of sin.

### **The Greatest Commandmentâ??Entire Consecration**

34 But the Pharisees, when they heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, gathered themselves together. 35 One of them, a lawyer, asked him a question, testing him. 36 â??Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?â?•  
37 Jesus said to him, â?? â??You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.â?? 38 This is the first and great commandment. 39 A second likewise is this, â??You shall love your neighbor as yourself.â?? 40 The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.â?• –*The Gospel of Matthew* 22:34-40

Comment: Like in the previous passage, Jesus here promotes entire consecration to God. To love God with your whole being and with all your energies and affections leaves no room for loving sin. It leaves no room for turning from God, even for a moment, to commit immoral actsâ??whether by deeds, words, or thoughts.

The second command, taken in its simplicity, excludes selfishness, which excludes a whole world of sins. When we consider this second command in connection with the first, it becomes clear that one’s love for their neighbor must be saturated in love for God, since love for God is to be all-consuming. This shows that Jesus’ idea of the love we ought to have for our neighbor is principle-based, not sentiment-based. If all we have is the common, sentimental attachment to a friend that leads to compromising faithfulness to God and to truth, we don’t have the love Jesus was speaking of. The sort of love Jesus advocated is a love that is ever consistent with moral integrity; it is a love much like that described by Paulâ??patient, kind, envyleless, prideless, shunning impropriety, not seeking its own way, not rejoicing in unrighteousness, but rejoicing in truth (1 Cor. 13:4-6).

Lastly, the love for God and neighbor Jesus speaks of in this passage is a love which is consistent with God’s law. In fact, he says the whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments. A logical deduction from this is that keeping these two commandments entails keeping all the instructions given through the law and prophets. It likewise follows that one cannot violate any instruction given through the law or the prophets without violating these two great commandments. Once again, this highlights Jesus’ teaching regarding entire consecrationâ??unreserved and undeviating obedience to every command of God, which is

nothing short of moral perfection in practice.

### **Your Righteousness Must Exceed That of the Scribes and Pharisees**

17 “Don’t think that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I didn’t come to destroy, but to fulfill. 18 For most certainly, I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not even one smallest letter or one tiny pen stroke shall in any way pass away from the law, until all things are accomplished. 19 Therefore, whoever shall break one of these least commandments and teach others to do so, shall be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven; but whoever shall do and teach them shall be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven. 20 For I tell you that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, there is no way you will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. – *The Gospel of Matthew* 5:17-20

Comment: It would be difficult to read this without realizing that Jesus is holding up an incredibly high standard of righteousness. Yet, there’s one aspect over which many get confused. Some interpret the phrase “shall be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven” as indicating that those who break, and teach others to break, the least commandment will be in God’s Kingdom, only with a lesser status. There are several reasons why we can know this is a misinterpretation:

1. If this statement was designed to indicate that commandment-breakers will be in God’s Kingdom, it should say they will “be least in the Kingdom of Heaven.” But this isn’t what it says. It says they “shall be *called* least in the Kingdom of Heaven.”
2. In Greek, the phrase “in the Kingdom of Heaven” modifies the verb translated as “be called;” it doesn’t modify those who break the least commandments and who are themselves called “least.” In other words, the phrase “in the Kingdom of Heaven” doesn’t tell us where the commandment-breakers are; it tells us where the act of calling them “least” takes place.
3. The statement that the commandment-breakers will be called “least” is introduced by the word “Therefore,” which forms a logical connection between this statement and what precedes it. What precedes it is Jesus’ declaration that he didn’t come to destroy the law and that even the smallest part of the law won’t pass away while heaven and earth remain. There is nothing about the applicability and continuance of the law that logically implies that those who break its least commandments should be permitted to enter God’s Kingdom, just with a lesser status. On the contrary, the continuing applicability of the whole law implies that breaking it is as serious a crime as ever—meriting exclusion from God’s Kingdom. This is expressly stated in the following verse (see the next point).
4. The statement regarding those called “least” and those called “great” is followed by another statement beginning with the word “For,” which forms a logical connection between this statement and next. The next statement (verse 20) says, “For I tell you that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, there is no way you will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.” Clearly, this wouldn’t make sense as a reason why commandment-breakers should be accepted as low-status citizens of God’s Kingdom. It instead makes sense as a reason why they would be excluded from the Kingdom and regarded by its citizens as “the lowest of the low,” or “least.”
5. In order for commandment-breakers to actually be called “least” by those in the Kingdom of Heaven, they could not be among the inheritors of the Kingdom. The reason for this is that

there will also be people who won't inherit the Kingdom. It's hard to imagine that there will be a class of people in the Kingdom who will have it worse than those outside of the Kingdom such that they, and not those outside of the Kingdom, will be called "least." And if you're thinking they will only be considered least *among the citizens of God's Kingdom*, recall point 2 that the phrase "in the Kingdom of Heaven" isn't indicating where "the least" are; it is indicating where the action of calling commandment-breakers "least" takes place. The most straightforward reading is that commandment-breakers are called "least" by those in the Kingdom of Heaven because those called "least" truly are the least; there is no one worse off than they. This could only be the case if the commandment-breakers are among those excluded from the Kingdom.

6. To interpret Jesus as saying those who break the least commandments will enter the Kingdom, albeit with a lesser status, would be pitting him against his own teachings as found throughout the gospels, including *The Gospel of Matthew* where this statement is found. Simply read again the statements we've already covered and those that follow in the rest of this article. If we allow consistency on the part of Jesus and the author of this gospel, we have to regard the sin-permitting interpretation of this statement as a misinterpretation.

With this misinterpretation out of the way, it should be plain that Jesus expected his followers to keep every commandment of God's law, from the greatest to the least. To break the least commandment to lack even one thing prevents a person from entering the Kingdom of Heaven. Indeed, "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, there is no way you will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven." To expect such a high standard of moral perfection is to regard it as attainable.

The last aspect of this passage we'll pause on for a moment is what it says regarding teaching. Again, Jesus said, "whoever shall break one of these least commandments *and teach others to do so*, shall be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven; but whoever shall do *and teach them* shall be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven." This clearly addresses not only behavior, but doctrine. Jesus here discredits those who teach that it is acceptable to break any of the commandments (even the least). And he endorses those who keep, and who teach others to keep, *all* of God's commandments (including the least). Those who claim to be followers of Jesus and who teach that it is impossible to avoid sinning (that at least some sin in "minor" areas is expected) advocate a doctrine that Jesus explicitly condemned. Those who speak against the teaching that tells people to keep all of God's law without breaking the least commandment (without committing sin), reveal that their evaluation of moral doctrine is directly at odds with Jesus' own evaluation. They consider advocates of moral perfection to be worthy of condemnation while Jesus declares them worthy of commendation.

(MORE TO COME)

---

- 1  
Written May-June 2024
-

2

All Scripture quotations from [The World English Bible](#).