Christians Love One Another?

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by Professor Bruce Stevens

Jesus, having just washed the disciple's feet and about to go to the cross, gives a new commandment, "That you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another." Now if you have just come to church or have faithfully worshiped for the last few decades you would be familiar with the formula: God loves us, Christ died for us and as Christians we should love one another.

So why not end the sermon here? What could be the problem? The problem is that this is an ideal, Christianity is full of them and predictably all are hard to put into practice – so on Sundays we cast a thought in the direction of our Christian ideals and then live our life pretty much as we always have. Monday through the rest of the week, until when Sunday comes around again.. I find these ideals difficult and I have been trying for over thirty years!

I would like to have an honest preacher's discussion with you about this text (34 words).

1. Why is the Text Challenging?

Jesus assumed a close knit Christian community. The problem in real terms is that as people we are all different and the more we get to know somebody, the more likely they are to be annoying. Think about the people in your life, who may or may not be Christians, can you think of ways that they are difficult? Does being a Christian make much difference? Well, sometimes when it comes to reconciling differences but in my experience not often.

Now there is a solution to this problem in the text, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." If we look to the example of Jesus, we see self-sacrifice, but the difficulty is that when we sacrifice ourselves for others it leads to imbalance in relationships and resentment – and some psychologist is likely to label it pathological.

Our dilemma has two sides (a) *proximity*: the people who we know best are not necessarily easy to be with. (b) The supposed solution is unbalanced *Self-sacrifice:* which leads to resentment. Can we solve this? Not as long as we leave this as an ideal formula. So I propose a little creative playing with the text and see if we make any progress.

2. Love or Like?

Can you imagine Jesus standing before you? If you find this difficult just ignore me for a moment (it won't be the first time I have been ignored standing in a pulpit). Back to the exercise. Can you imagine Jesus saying something to you? Shut your eyes if it helps. Hear from him these words, "I like you." Notice what it feels like.

I have changed the formula, taking love and substituting liked, surely a more modest word. But oddly it has an edge. Most Christians would readily affirm, "Yes, God loves me." But does God *like* us? Are we likeable? This implies 'as we are' which is more theologically confronting. So I turn to one attempt to articulate a sense of being liked by God. James Alison (2003) is an influential Roman Catholic theologian. His attempt to be transparent having same-sex orientation, in a largely conservative church, has been controversial. Indeed he was expelled from a religious order. Alison (2003) said in *On being liked*, "God likes us. All of us. God likes me and I like being liked. It has nothing to do with whether we are good or bad, indeed, he takes it for granted that we are all more or less caught up (in sinful patterns)" (Alison, 2003, p. 15). God's category for us is created. We are God's work and worthwhile.

Back to the love word. In Christian circles, according to Alison, it can be over used and carries the sense of being forcefully rescued. But behind the word *liked* is an astonishing gentleness. Alison went from graduating at Oxford to Brazil as a missionary. He went with the highest of ideals: to minister to those dying of AIDS. But he was soon emotionally bankrupt. He came to a realization "what was missing was the ability to like anyone. Either them, or myself." (p. 67) Later Alison discovered a capacity to be liked and to like. In this inherent reciprocity he found, "There is something deeply non-moralistic about this, because it means that we find ourselves learning to receive the other as a gift."

Allow me to recap. I have identified a familiar formula, changed the word *love* to *like*, and suddenly things become more challenging and realistic, less in the realm of ideals and something, as Christians, we can struggle with and hopefully find a way to better put into practice.

3. Self-Compassion

Another visualization. Imagine you have left you house or apartment to go to your car. You reach for your car keys and find you left them behind. What do you say to yourself? What is your self-talk in such circumstances? Do you curse yourself? The word 'idiot' would find its way into mine.

So here is another difficulty. We often treat ourselves harshly. We accept, as Christians, high ideals for ourselves and then beat ourselves up when we fall short. It can be quite a challenge to love ourselves. Jesus was asked by his disciples, "What was the greatest commandment?" He gave two: to love God wholeheartedly, and "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." (Matt. 22: 39) This is the key: you can only love your neighbour to the degree you love yourself. That is the link. It seems impertinent to play with another commandment, but let's try again substituting love with like: "You shall *like* your neighbour as yourself." Now can we make progress with that? And it works better with *like* than *love*.

Self-compassion is now popular in psychology. It is in its relative infancy. One of the leading researchers is Kristen Neff (www.self-compassion.org). She is an academic psychologist who has completed a number of research studies.

Neff has articulated three principles of Self-compassion. You might consider them three doorways into putting self-compassion into practice:

1. **Self-kindness versus self-judgment** Self-compassion encourages you to relate to yourself with kindness and understanding not harsh judgment. Sometimes it seems natural to 'tough' on ourselves (ironically more than we would ever be to others), but this leads to psychological bruises, at the least, and at worst to self-destructive urges. In the movie *Fight Club* (1999) the realization eventually dawns on the viewer that people are hitting themselves and not an opponent. The person most often injured through self-criticism is ourselves!

2. **Feelings of common humanity versus isolation.** When I make a mistake or do something wrong it is natural to think "I am the only person who has ever managed, in the history of our planet, to do this." This is isolating. The alternative is to see our experience as part of the human experience. To be human is to err, well, to be imperfect. Understanding this can help us to feel connected to flawed humanity. Christians might think of "all have sinned" (Romans 3: 23). Eastern religions recognize being finite or limited – but again being human. This is the ground we all stand on. It helps us to be more self-compassionate.

3. **Mindfulness versus over identification.** There has been a mindfulness revolution in mental health circles. It is about being aware of the present moment. To intentionally notice. This helps to tame racing thoughts and rumination. Mindfulness is also accepting of reality. You can approach negative personal experiences with curiosity and non-judgment. Acceptance comes first. Self-compassion encourages the

balance of holding painful thoughts and feelings in mindful awareness, rather than avoiding or being overly fused with them (Neff, et al., 2007).

The first *response* from self-compassion is to see that we are hurting and give care-of-self. This might be as simple as acknowledging that we feel an uncomfortable emotion, say frustration in a situation and then acknowledging that it is normal to feel that way. It is not the stoicism of 'grin and bear it', instead self-compassion is active in offering soothing and comfort to the self (Neff, 2011). Indeed "when life circumstances are stressful, instead of immediately trying to control or fix the problem, a self-compassionate response might entail pausing first to offer oneself soothing and comfort" (Neff & Germer, 2012, p. 1). As a form of mindfulness self-compassion works more with motivation: It is goodwill towards ourselves.

Think about your keys again. You could in that moment say (a) It's not a big deal. (b) I often forget things, it is just part of being human. (c) Notice my breathing and feel centered.

If you recognize that you beat yourself up, perhaps in pursuit of high standards or even worthy goals, I would gently suggest that it is profoundly counterproductive. You might make it a goal to become more self-compassionate. Neff, spelt N-E-F-F has a website with a self-compassion scale, you can do it on line and it can be used to gauge your progress in moving towards self-compassion.

Conclusion

It has been said that no one walks away from seeing the Grand Canyon disappointed. I have stood on the edge in awe of what no picture can capture. It is 5000' deep, straight down, and the closest point is 18 miles wide. As Christians we face a similar divide. There is an even greater distance between our ideals and our ability to put them into practice. I think it is helpful to admit we fall short. But if we are to take the challenge of living a Christian life seriously, to be creative and find perhaps modest ways to put what Jesus says into practice. I have looked at the commandments of Jesus, the new commandment and the greatest two commandments. I have substituted like for love and argued that self-compassion may make the challenge to 'love one another' more achievable. And the primary relationship is with ourselves, if we get that right we can begin to like, even love, others.

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