



Today's sermon: Take Jesus at face value!

Posted: Sunday, November 30, 2025

It's Sunday. When most of us traditionally read the Sunday paper. And three days ago it was Thanksgiving. Seems like the right time for a sermon.

My dad was a preacher. And even though I didn't follow in his footsteps, I do still preach in a sense. Just not in the way most of you probably understand the role.

Full disclosure. I was raised in a small, country Church of Christ in Waverly, Tennessee, one of several rural communities in the western part of the state. I attended worship services Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday evening pretty much since birth. In my family, it wasn't optional.

For most of my formative years, I was taught God was basically an angry old man who wanted to send everyone to hell who didn't follow the checklist – and the checklist I was introduced to was strict, detailed, and unforgiving.

It would be an understatement to say that my view of the Almighty has evolved considerably since my younger days. I have come to appreciate a God who wants to be loved more than feared – something that was not emphasized during my upbringing.

Moreover, I now tend to take the teachings of Jesus at face value, a practice that eluded most of the preachers and Sunday school teachers I knew growing up. To them, everything seemed to require intense study and careful interpretation.

I was always puzzled by the need to make the teachings of Jesus more complicated than what he originally intended.

Take Matthew 25: 41-46 (NIV), for example:

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

“They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’ “He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’ “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

My contention is that what Jesus is saying here can be taken literally, i.e., without any additional analysis, review or reflection.

I believe what Jesus is instructing us to do – like most of his teachings - stands alone (can be fully understood without referencing any other of his teachings in any other Scriptures). This is what I mean by “at face value.”

Context is irrelevant, the message here can be universally applied without any restrictions, stipulations or other qualifiers. Notice there is not an asterisk that comes with these verses.

Jesus did not say “Do what I say, but only under these circumstances and under these conditions.” Nor did he say, “Do what I say, but make sure you reference other passages that give a more complete and accurate sense of what I’m really commanding you to do.”

Jesus is very clear and unambiguous with his language: Feed the hungry. If someone is thirsty, give them a drink. Welcome the stranger. Provide clothes for those who need them. Heal the sick. Take care of the incarcerated and their families.

Again, Jesus did not say, “Feed the hungry – but only if they are incapable of providing for themselves.” Similarly, he did not say, “Welcome the stranger – but only if they are here legally.”

And unless you are seeing something in these verses that I’m not, Jesus did not say, “Heal the sick – but only if they are insured,” or “Take care of those in prison – unless they deserve to be there, then you can treat them as less than human.”

Jesus never made his commandments conditional. You either do what he says, without question or reservation, or you don’t. Jesus wasn’t big on spin or making excuses.

My advice: Be very wary of anyone who pushes an interpretation of the teachings of Jesus that goes beyond what he actually said. And it’s usually easy to spot these individuals as their explanations typically begin with “Yes, but…” or “But Jesus obviously didn’t mean ‘those’ people…”

Ignore these people. They do not understand Jesus and are often trying to twist his teachings to fit their self-serving narrative, which they have determined in advance based on their own selective prejudices and preconceived notions of who is “worthy” of being fed, hydrated, welcomed, clothed, healed, or looked after.

God is love. And that love is unconditional. If you want to truly be Christ-like, don’t put man-made limitations on the help you provide others.

Jesus didn’t.



— Aaron W. Hughey is a university distinguished professor in the Department of Counseling and Student Affairs at Western Kentucky University. The views expressed in his columns are entirely his own.

www.bgdailynews.com