

## Humor

A man was walking down a path one day, his mind wandering, as our minds often do, distracted by his current daydream to the point that he failed to notice the path's end as he tumbled over the steep edge....

Grasping at the air as he toppled, he managed to grab hold of a singular sapling protruding from the side of the steep canyon as he watched one of his shoes falling hundreds of feet through the air towards its certain demise.

Dangling there, his grip weakening and hoping to avoid a fate similar to that of his lost shoe, the man looked upwards toward the heavens and considered his next move.

Realizing that no escape was possible, and considering that he had never been a particularly religious man, he fell back on his only remaining option, which involved a sudden spiritual revelation and a desire to speak to God.

“Hello?” He shouted, desperately, “I know I’ve never been a religious man, God, but if you help me out of this one, I promise to always do right by you here on out!”

He listened for a few seconds, and then a faint voice carried on the breeze came back to him – “I am the Lord thy God, and I will save you if you will only believe in me and do what I say.”

“Sure, God!” He screamed back, his grip slowly slipping. “Anything you say. I believe in you and promise to do whatever you say! But Please hurry – I can’t hold much longer!”

Once again, the faint voice of God was carried to the man upon a gentle breeze. “Let go of the branch,” the voice said.

Silence, then “Excuse me?” the man asked.

“Let go of the branch,” the gentle voice of God repeated.

The man was silent for a while, his mind racing with fear and hope, after which he responded, “Is there anyone else up there I can talk to?”

-- so listening to the small, still voice (it seems) can be important when we least expect it... and its message can often surprise us.

## Disclaimer

Some people hold on to biblical scripture as the literal transcription on the word of God, as though an elderly bearded man dictated it to a secretary who faithfully jotted down each syllable.

Others see it as a hopelessly outdated and trivial artifact, with no more pertinence to the modern world than an eight track tape and of little value to us -- even as a collection of stories.

No matter where you are on the scale of biblical literalist to biblical dismissivist (a word I just made up), we must all agree that the book does hold great significance to a lot of people.

I like to believe that we all have a direct connection to the Christ Spirit within us – and that we therefore don't necessarily *need* a preacher or any particular book or passage to tell us what the small, still voice of God is saying.

Still, I see the bible as a captivating and revealing connection with history, and feel we can glean much from its pages in order to grow and know.

It is in this spirit that I hope you will indulge today's short pursuit of some practical uses of the book so pervasive, that it's latin origin comes from the word meaning, simply, "book."

## **Lesson**

### ***Introduction***

We have heard many lessons about the importance of changing ourselves rather than changing others.

The gospel of Matthew quotes Christ as saying, "*They do not take the log out of their own eye before attempting to remove the splinter from someone elses!*" (Matthew 7.3)

Then in the Gospel of John, he says, "*He who is without sin cast the first stone!*" (John 8.7)

Many new testament scriptures and therefore many lessons here and elsewhere focus on our being *less* concerned with the spiritual journeys taken by others... and more focused on our own journeys.

SandRa once made a comment, during one of her "talks" to the effect that we might consider listening to her lesson in terms of our *own* life – rather than applying it (as we so often do) to the person sitting next to us on the pew.

-- I don't know about you, but she had caught me "red-handed" – as I realized that I was, in fact, *not* thinking about me but someone else as she spoke. I chuckled to myself... only slightly embarrassed... and allowed the rest of her lesson to be about me.

It was a healthy reminder – since we are often inclined to think first of the lessons that others need to learn before we consider our own.

After all, it's always easier to fix other peoples' problems, right?

But still... even realizing the importance of our own spiritual journeys... at some point we have to accept that we are social animals.

"Changing ourselves" doesn't always seem to be enough, does it?

Why else would we have taken physical form if not to touch – to feel – to make a difference in the lives of others?

That's why we write books and poetry and music and feel the need to speak – to be *heard* – because our own internal spiritual journeys don't seem sufficient to satisfy our apparent need to make a difference in this magnificent natural world.

Could it be that part of our own spiritual journey IS to affect others?

For many, Christ's message of "not casting the first stone" or "removing the log" from their own eye does not satisfy their compulsion – their innate need – to reach out and touch the lives of others.

That's what I'd like to talk about today... it involves reconciling the idea of Christ's message of our internal spiritual growth with our innate need to be part of an external community and our "God-given" compulsion to want to change the world.

I've entitled today's lesson:

### ***Reconciling the Personal Journey with the Social Quest***

That's a good topic, isn't it?

-- I mean, don't you agree that the world still has some room for improvement?

How can we help but want to improve *more* than just ourselves – to want to leave the world in just a little better shape than we found it?

This issue, by the way, isn't a new one. It's been an ongoing debate since Christ threw his first wrench into the machine of religion.

Since Christ brought us his *revolutionary* "New Covenant," we have struggled with it's poetic simplicity on the one hand... and on the other hand with the fact that it doesn't seem to allow us to do the one thing we like to do most – which is telling other people what *they* should be doing.

Think about it. The old testament was kind of fun in a way. It had all kinds of rules, from dietary limitations to work schedules to building codes to sexual and relationship prohibitions.

And there's a part of us that likes such rules. After all, the more rules we have... the less we are required to think.

There's a comfort in that – the comfort of security. And people have always been prone to sacrifice their freedom for some extra security. Just look at our President and the “Patriot Act,” which – with the stroke of a pen – took away most of our civil liberties (like the right of trial or counsel) in order to protect us from “terrorism.”

Similarly, the old testament made it easy to tell people what to do.

Hell, in the old testament, you couldn't even look over your shoulder without being turned into a pillar of salt!

Still, it offered in its sometimes stifling and even contradictory dogma, the security of knowing God's will for those who were chosen by God to follow His will.

And then this hippie comes along and screws everything up.

His name was “Jesus,” and he tells everyone, “I want you to forget that old covenant – I have a new one that you can replace it with. You remember all those commandments and rules and dietary restrictions and stuff about sacrificing small animals? – ... well, let's try this, instead:”

And Jesus said: “*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.*” John 13:34

We've all heard that verse from the gospel of John... and it sounds beautiful, but to the untrained ear, it appears to leave much unsaid.

I mean... surely Jesus didn't intend to replace *all* the protections provided by the biblical “Patriot Act” (the Old Testament) with that one simple, poetic rule to love one another!

### ***The New Covenant***

Many so-called Christians have ironically found the teachings of Christ to be totally inadequate, returning to the Old Covenant – the texts available *before* the time of Christ-- simply because they can't find, within the teachings of Christ alone, sufficient ammunition to justify their innate desire to reach outside themselves and “mess with people.”

More than that... in a culture of fear... the idea of “loving one another,” hardly seems sufficient to protect us from all those scary things out there. Where is the safety net of rules and restrictions we were so comforted by in the Old Testament?

After all, Christ never said “Thou Shalt Not...” anything!

It's only natural. We look around us and see an imperfect world – with injustice and hate and violence... and we want to help make a difference.

So how else can we *make* a difference?... unless we fall back on the old ways – the Old Testament, and scream from the mountaintops that “God says ‘THOU SHALT NOT DO THAT ANYMORE!’”

How do we reconcile Christ's' teachings that “Blessed are the meek,” that we should love *especially* our enemies and that we should “turn the other cheek” (all poetic and beautiful and even revolutionary ideas) –

-- how do we reconcile these teachings with our need and our desire to be an instrument of change in a world where people are often so awful to each other?

To understand the answer to that question... to begin to understand how it can work for us to both remove the log from our own eye AND help facilitate the removal of our neighbors splinter... I think it might be helpful to consider that Christ didn't himself “write” the New Testament. Jesus was many things, but he was not an author.

### ***Christ's Example***

The new testament was written by witnesses, and much like a court of law... the witnesses can't “testify” about what they see until AFTER they see it.

It might have been nice, though, if Jesus could have got up in the morning and asked his disciples “what's on the agenda for today?”

And the answer might have been, “I don't know... let me check the book.”



But the book wasn't written yet.

And Jesus, like the best teachers always do, taught his disciples through examples – though verbal examples, or parables – because his teachings really were revolutionary and remarkable – and the parables made it easier for folks to “wrap their heads around” his underlying message.

Through Christ's language, we are given many wonderful lessons that ultimately deal with love and our spiritual journey and the fact that we are all connected.

But those who resort back to the Old Testament for instructions on how we should deal with others are missing the point of the New Covenant.

They use the Old Testament language of war to justify war and violence in God's name – and are missing the fact that Christ also taught us how we can change *the world* without the need to resort to violence or hate or judgement.

After all, Christ taught us more than parables.

He taught us *more* than how we can better experience our own internal spiritual journeys.

You see, the book wasn't written yet. For Christ, the message may have seemed obvious – though for many of us – it seems to have been lost by those of us who look for our answers in his words.

Of course, he taught us through his words, yes – through parables and stories....

But he also gave us the example of his *life*.

Christ didn't only *tell us* through parable how we might have a fuller *spiritual* journey--- but he also himself was an instrument of change (without anger or hate or violence)

– and through his *actions*, he challenges us to *also* reach out and make a difference in the lives of others.

**Mohandas Gandhi** put it this way: “*You must be the change you wish to see in the world.*”

### ***The big “misunderstanding”***

I think it's more than a little ironic and even tragic that the one defining concept that Christ spent his ministry trying to communicate – the notion of his “New Covenant” and a breaking from the violent traditions associated with the Old Testament...

– the exact defining principle that was intended to make followers of this new religion *different* from those that came before, and the reason we call ourselves “Christian,” --- has been the most difficult thing for us to understand.

... and preachers still stand at pulpits and preach “pre-Christian” concepts from the Old Testament about a wrathful God.

They speak “pre-Christian” concepts of man as “God's instrument of wrath.”

They justify war with “pre-Christian” concepts.

They justify hate and slavery and bigotry– and up until as recently as the 1960s it was common for folks like Jerry Falwell to use “pre-Christian” scripture to justify segregation.

Sure, they talk about Christ's love, but then they use the pre-Christian “enforcements” from the Old Testament to *protect* it (as if Christ's love might somehow die away unless we went to war to defend it).

Isn't that ridiculous?

And it's ironic and tragic because Christ spent his life trying to tell us that we had a *New Covenant*... that all we had to do was to love one another...

– he kept trying to tell us we were no longer bound by the old ways – the “pre-Christian” texts.

I saw a cartoon on a Religious Right website a few weeks ago. It was a cartoon image of Christ being crucified *again* – in modern times... but this time he was being crucified by evil liberals. They (we) were crucifying him for saying he hated gays....

It's almost funny, because of course; Christ never said anything like that. He spent his life telling us that our new mission to not be judgmental and to love one another...

I can't help but imagine that Christ might have been disappointed to see his message being so distorted.

### ***What “Practical Christianity” means to me***

So if we want to use Christ's New Covenant – the new technique Christ taught through the example of his words and his life –

--the same technique, by the way, taught by my personal heroes **Martin Luther King, Mother Theresa** and **Mohandas Mahatma Gandhi** –

-- if we want to apply these teachings in a *practical* way – that both removes the log from our eye and allows us to be an instrument to help other's remove their “splinters” --

-- then how are we to respond to a person who's pre-Christian fear-based belief system has brought them to the incorrect conclusion that Jesus hated gays or Jews or Muslims or anyone (even the least of us) – or that the bible justifies or God demands hate or war or violence?

-- how should we respond to people like that? – how do we make a difference in the world when there *are* people like that?

First, we must recognize that these people are not our enemies. (Christ, after all, admonishes us to love those we would call “enemy.”)

If we see them as *victims* of their own “fear-based” belief systems, then the “*belief system*” can become our enemy, and only then and for the first time we can speak to these people through a spirit of love and respect.

Once we take the language of violence out of our hearts, we've come a long way toward following Christ's example.

*“You must be the change you wish to see in the world.”* – Meaning that if we want to see and end to hate, we must respond to it with love and through respect.

We must also be patient. Let’s not make the success of our lives depend on *visible* change. Let’s agree to be happy in the journey and knowing that we are trying (which is itself a journey, rather than a destination).

Because people rarely change in front of us.

Just as a flower takes time to bloom and a wound takes time to heal, the seeds we plant will almost always take time to grow...

Have faith that they will grow, however, and we can take comfort in the knowledge that we have planted them. I think that’s exactly what Christ meant when he talked about having the faith of a mustard seed – and I think we can even interpret it to mean that we should have faith IN the mustard seed...

-- have faith that the mustard seed will grow – even if it doesn’t immediately sprout up in front of you...

-- and though I’ve never seen a biblical mustard plant, I understand it is one of the most sinuous and resilient species on the planet – that it will thrive in almost any soil, even in the bleakest dessert – but it takes time to grow.

Look at the life of Christ – all the seeds he planted. Who could have guessed how they would grow!

And look at how many people now who identify as “Christian.” I’d say those seeds grew well!

### ***The privilege of planting seeds***

I used to teach survival at the Air Force Academy, and I think I stumbled across a truth that Christ and Gandhi and King and Mother Theresa knew all too well.

The truth is that, if we waited until we were perfect before embarking on our mission to teach and affect others – our mission to leave the world in better shape than we found it – if we waited till our personal spiritual development was complete before we started any of that external stuff—

-- well, then no one would ever reach outside themselves.

Sure, I was a good teacher, but not half as good as my students. I learned more from my students than I could have ever hoped to teach them.

So maybe reaching out to others in love and respect is a fundamental part of our internal spiritual journey – maybe that’s how all this works.

It’s certainly working for me – because the more I reach out, the more I grow... and who knows – maybe I’m planting a few seeds along the way.

I can think of no greater privilege than the privilege of calling myself a planter of such seeds.

So lets all go out and work on our own personal spiritual journeys –

-- who knows, we might just find ourselves planting some seeds along the way and leaving this world in better shape than we found it!

-- Troy Carlyle  
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