

## Operating Instructions

Mark 12:28-34

Crossroads Christian Church Psalm 146

All Saints

Pent 23B 11/1/15

It's not that easy being a man. There are so many things that you have to do or can't do in order to maintain membership in the gender. Sometimes when you're driving in unfamiliar territory, you really want to stop and ask for directions when you're lost, but you just can't. It's not allowed. So you drive on and hope that the next crossroad will look familiar. And sometimes when you're assembling something, and you just can't figure out whether or not you should have attached flange D to post E before you did subassembly B, it would be so nice to look at the instructions. But you just can't. It isn't allowed. You'd be ridden out of the man's union on a rail. Most of all, deep down in your heart, you know that if you had been a real man, you should have been able to figure it out for yourself, just like Dad did. So you fumble on, and hope that you don't have too many extra parts when you get the project completed.

The Bible, in some ways, is an instruction manual for the Christian life—and a manual that even men should read. It's more than just an instruction manual, much more, but I think we can all agree that we can go to it to find help for living. At the heart of the Hebrew Scriptures are the first five books of the Bible, called the Torah. We translate Torah as the Law, but the word has a much wider meaning than that. It means instruction, or guidance—operating instructions, in other words. There are two parts to the Instruction—holiness laws that help our Jewish brothers and sisters be attentive and faithful to God, and laws for living in community—acting justly; not trampling on the needs of the poor and homeless; feeding the hungry; honoring God through acts of goodness to others. Over six hundred laws gave the Jewish people guidance on how to live. The Ten Commandments, that great summary of the law which you may have memorized as a child, reflects that—the first four commandments point us toward God. The last six point out our responsibility to others. Later, the prophet Micah asked, "What does the Lord require of you?" and he would answer his own question with three instructions: "to do justice; and to love kindness; and to walk humbly with your God." Do you see a pattern here? Again, it's about living a life in relationship with God and neighbor.

So it was no surprise when Jesus came along and summarized the 600+ laws into the great commandment: "And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, `Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all

your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

When Jesus said this, the scribe knew that Jesus was speaking in the best tradition of his Jewish heritage, and he was duly impressed. Jesus summed it up well—not just duty to God and duty to neighbor, but love to God; love to neighbor; and that implies healthy love of self. And the more time goes on, the better that advice sounds; the more it rings true. In a way it sounds so basic, this love, like Christianity 101. But it gets to be graduate level when we put it into practice; when we are called to make a difficult choice in the workplace that challenges our sense of right and wrong; when we have to respond in a loving way to someone who has hurt us or disappointed us; when we wonder why we should go out of our way to help someone who is different from us, who we are tempted to look down upon; and so many other real-life situations.

Sometimes in instruction manuals, they have little logos in the margin, to call your attention to something you might skip over at your peril. And when they come to a key point, there might be a big exclamation mark out in the margin—and that's what should be right here, with the great commandment. All the rest is interpretation. How do we express our love for God, how do we express our love for neighbor, in a given situation? Other scriptures give us advice on this, but the story of Jesus himself gives us the biggest clue. Everything that Jesus did was for the love of God and/or for the love of neighbor! That's why the WWJD—what would Jesus do?—craze swept the nation a few years back. We realize that what Jesus would do would be the loving thing, that which would tie together love of God and neighbor.

Martin Luther King, Jr. put it this way. "Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend. We never get rid of an enemy by meeting hate with hate; we get rid of an enemy by getting rid of enmity. By its very nature, hate destroys and tears down; but its very nature, love creates and builds up. Love transforms with redemptive power."<sup>1</sup>

This is All Saints Sunday and Reformation Sunday. That's why we sang "For All the Saints," and recognized those who have graduated to the Church Eternal over the past twelve months. What's a saint? Not someone with a halo and a perfectly holy life. No, a saint is anyone who tries sincerely to live as Christians. We can celebrate those who kept the faith alive and strong in troubled times, those who spread the gospel to new lands, those who did deeds of healing and

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., from sermon "Loving Your Enemies," delivered at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, at Christmas, 1957.

kindness. Frederick Buechner put it this way: 'In God's holy flirtation with the world, God occasionally drops a handkerchief. These handkerchiefs are called saints.' They are people whose lives and love draw us closer to God. One of the joys of being a minister, of having served several churches, is that in each one you get to know a few saints, people who live simple, ordinary lives, but who let God shine through."<sup>2</sup>

I believe that we each have our own company of saints—people we knew, people that we have fond memories of, who helped make the faith real for us—a Sunday school teacher, a grandma, a pastor, a neighbor—and we should be grateful to them. Maybe later today, you can spend a few minutes naming your saints, and thanking God for them.

And we should be grateful that there are people acting out their love of God and neighbor today. We can all find our own ways to love God and to love our neighbor.

One other thing that's important to remember—the Great Commandment, the call to live as saints, is a call to community. The church is called to follow it, too. Back when I was in college, a must-read book for theological students was H. Richard Niebuhr's *The Purpose of the Church and its Ministry*. It was tough, dense, reading, a prophetic call for the church to be the church. But after all the long words and convoluted sentences, the message of the book was this. *The purpose of the church and its ministry is to increase the love of God and the love of neighbor.* That's it. That's the exclamation mark out in the margin. As we at Crossroads Christian Church live into a new future, let that guide our decisions and the way we make decisions. Let us, in our work and worship, our play and fellowship, our service and mission, work to increase the love of God and the love of neighbor. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon

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<sup>2</sup> Frederickbuechner.com, from Buechner's book *Wishful Thinking*.