

Be Sincere (or “Artificial Love”)

by Tricia Berg

Let love be sincere, detesting what is evil and clinging to what is good. Romans 12:9

It seems to me that the acceptance in our society of imitation forms of sweeteners is an indication of our willingness to accept substitutions in other areas as well, including our faith. Too many people are satisfied with artificial love for God and imitation faith in Him. God doesn't need either. He made the real thing when it comes to sweeteners. He has no use for man-made versions of them, any more than He has any use for it when people go through the motions of worshiping Him. REAL love for God looks a lot different than the fake kind, just like artificial sweeteners have no nutrients and taste different than authentic ones. Fake worship makes a show of it on Sunday morning and then does whatever it wants the rest of the week. False devotion puts itself first--God comes a ways down the list.

How do we know that God detests that kind of "devotion"? Because He said so Himself. The kind of "works" that are discussed in the Book of James are not only things we think of as "good deeds," but also include simple obedience to God—doing the right thing even when no one is looking, caring about what God cares about even if no one else seems to, resisting the urge to do wrong no matter how tempting, even if everyone else is doing it and seems to be getting away with it, etc. These kinds of “works” are not earning us salvation, but they are very useful to God in determining whether our faith is genuine or fake, and our works will be judged and rewarded by Jesus. (2 Corinthians 5:10, Revelation 11:18)

And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ""This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; 7 in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'" 8 You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men."
Mark 7:6-8

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, 17 even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. 18 "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. 19 Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will

live. 20 In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. 21 Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.” John 14:15-21

*Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. 22 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. 24 For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. 25 But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. 26 If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless. 27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself **unstained** from the world. James 1:21-27*

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? 17 So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. 18 But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. 19 You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! 20 Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; 23 and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God. 24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. 25 And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? 26 For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead. James 2:14-26

What were His commands and how will He manifest Himself to those who love Him—to those who show their love for Him by keeping His commands? He answered both questions very clearly and concisely, and also gave the conditions for entering the kingdom of God.

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 most important of all?" 29 Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30 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.' 31 The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." 32 And the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. 33 And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." 34 And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And after that no one dared to ask him any more questions. Mark 12:28-34

Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, "Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?" 23 Jesus answered him, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." 24 Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me. 25 "These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. 26 But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." John 14:22-26

Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." 4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" 5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." John 3:3-8

This is NOT to say that we earn our way, but that only a person who truly believes in their heart and is sincere when confessing with their mouth will be born again (i.e. indwelt by the Holy Spirit). It is only by His power that we can have the desire and ability to please Him. This is what it means to be "in" Christ Jesus, and as we saw above—God has made His home with (in) us—our bodies are His temple and we are the body of Christ. (Romans 12:4-5, 1 Corinthians 6:15-20, 10:17, 12:12-27, Ephesians 1:22-23, 3:6, 4:12, 5:23,

5:30, Colossians 1:24, 3:15) (It should go without saying that we are NOT God because of His dwelling within us or because we have been born into His spiritual family (because He is Spirit - John 4:24).

*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are **in Christ Jesus**. Romans 8:1*

"If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. 13 Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you. John 15:10, 13-14 (See all of John 15:1-14.)

Jesus didn't keep His Father's commands by merely claiming to believe in Him. He acted upon them. Abraham didn't merely say he would sacrifice His only beloved son, but he was fully intending to obey God. (His son Isaac was a typological foreshadow of Jesus. Isaac was spared, but Jesus was not, for our sake and of His own free will.) Paul exhorted the Philippians to live out their faith. They already believed, or he wouldn't be writing to them as "children of God." (Hebrews 11:6)

But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); 9 because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. Romans 10:8-10

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. 14 Do all things without grumbling or disputing, 15 that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, 16 holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. Philippians 2:12-16

"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. 24 Father, I desire that they also, whom

you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. 25 O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. 26 I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them." John 17:20-26

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. 6 For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 7 For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. 8 Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. 9 You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. Romans 8:5-9

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. John 1:12-13

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. 2 Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. 3 And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. 4 Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. 5 You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. 6 No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. 7 Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. 8 Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. 9 No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. 10 By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother. 1 John 3:1-10

Look once again at James 2:26 above. Physically we are dead if our spirit leaves us, and spiritually, we are dead in our sins, not born again unless God's Spirit regenerates ours. Notice in Titus 3 below, good works and justification

by grace through faith go hand-in-hand in the same passage. As children of God, our standard is higher than it was before, not lower. We represent the Ruler of ALL now. Do we need more incentive to obey than the fact that we are heirs of an unimaginably great, eternal inheritance and were told to do so? Or are we the sort who need to be beaten to submit to God? It's not the neighbor's children but our own that we instruct and discipline, right? People don't give orders to someone else's employees but their own, right? These words are for US who already believe. First believe, then obey.

Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, 2 to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people. 3 For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. 4 But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, 6 whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. 8 The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people. Titus 3:1-8

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. 4 In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. 5 And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. 6 For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." 7 It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? 8 If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. 9 Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? 10 For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his **holiness**. 11 For the*

moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. 12 Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, 13 and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. Hebrews 12:1-13

Peter said, "Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for all?" 42 And the Lord said, "Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom his master will set over his household, to give them their portion of food at the proper time? 43 Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. 44 Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. 45 But if that servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed in coming,' and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink and get drunk, 46 the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces and put him with the unfaithful. 47 And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. 48 But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more." Luke 12:41-48

The Church (the assembly of called out, set apart believers) is the Bride of Christ. A bridegroom and bride have great love and devotion for each other. If not, then they should NOT get married, should they? Our bridegroom already proved how much He loves us by suffering the intense violence of beatings, whippings, mocking, humiliation and ultimately dying for us nailed to a cross. It was so agonizing in every imaginable way that not one of us can look at a re-enactment of it without flinching, cringing and crying. Even reading a detailed description of it is emotionally painful. Is it too much for Him to ask us to care for Him and His holy name enough to show REAL love for Him instead of imitation? (Ephesians 5:22-33, 2 Corinthians 11:2-5)

He said He has gone to prepare a place for us and will be back to take those of us who are IN Him to be with Him forever. (1 John 3:2 above, John 14:2-3, 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18) No eye has seen nor mind conceived of what He has prepared for those who LOVE Him. (1 Corinthians 2:9-10) Jesus can't be fooled. He will be turning away many who do not love Him, because He doesn't know them. (Matthew 7:21-27, Matthew 25:1-13, Luke 13:22-30) They claimed to believe, but their deeds showed them to be liars. If they had known Him, they would have had the sense to at least respect and obey Him. The fact is that we can't really love someone we don't know. Maybe that's why we're repeatedly told to love our neighbors as ourselves (someone we know.)

(Matthew 19:19, 22:39, Mark 12:31, Luke 10:27, Romans 13:9, Galatians 5:14, James 2:8) And maybe the reason so many people don't know and love God is that they are too "busy" to read their Bibles, but it's amazing what we can make the time for if we really want to.

Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. 9 Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing. 10 For "Whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit; 11 let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it. 12 For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil." 13 Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? 14 But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, 15 but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, 16 having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. 17 For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil. 1 Peter 3:8-17

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. 2 He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. 3 And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. 4 Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, 5 but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: 6 whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. 1 John 2:1-6

The beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord. He is holy and infinitely powerful. Just knowing that much information should prevent us from thinking we can outsmart Him with false confessions and pretending we didn't know better when we disregard His will for us to behave in a manner worthy of Him. A great shaking of the entire world is coming, the likes of which will be unexplainable to anyone who does not know God. Be prepared. Our "acceptable worship" is not in empty words, but it is backed up from the heart with our actions.

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. 15 See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no

"root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; 16 that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. 17 For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears. 28 Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, 29 for our God is a consuming fire. Hebrews 12:14-17, 28-29

I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. Romans 12:1-2

His Spirit lives inside of those who truly believe in their hearts and have confessed with their mouths that He is their only Redeemer and LORD. We were given specific "fruits" to look for in those who have the Holy Spirit and if we don't seem them in ourselves or others, there is reason for concern. (Galatians 5:16-25, 2 Corinthians 13:1-5) His holy word says that if we love the world, then we do NOT have the love of God in us. Love for the world is enmity toward God. (1 John 2:15-17) We need to consider this and how our lives appear from that perspective. We were warned that everyone trying to live a godly life would be persecuted and the world would hate us. (John 15:18-20, 1 John 3:13) Apparently, there is something wrong with our walk with Christ if we are not experiencing either (and not because we have done wrong, but for the sake of His name). (1 Peter 3:17) If that is the case, then apparently, the world can perceive no difference between us and them. (John 15:19)

You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. 5 Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? James 4:4-5

Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, 13 while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. 2 Timothy 3:12-13

Imagine how well that would go over if in our earthly marriages the spouses cared nothing for the other's desires? Oh wait, we don't have to imagine,

because that is the state of marriage these days, isn't it? No, instead, think of marriages that have lasted many, many years. How do those spouses behave toward each other? With great love and care, right? They RESPECT each other. If one of them asks the other not to do something, they will probably have enough consideration for their beloved to honor that request. If they are asked to do something, they will think of it as an honor to serve their spouse in that way.

Well, those marriages are physical, earthly patterns for our spiritual relationship with our Savior, Lord and Sovereign King Jesus. Happily married couples think about each other many times throughout each day, not now and then in any given week. They communicate with each other as often as possible, just as we can communicate with our beloved Redeemer through reading the word, praying, worshiping and praising Him throughout each and every day. We are temples of the Lord. (2 Corinthians 6:16) We don't have to wait for a certain time or place to honor Him. We should be doing it throughout every day, wherever we are, including the way in which we reflect on Him by our behavior. A bride who loves her bridegroom doesn't act in such a way as to smear his name with mud, does she? (Jeremiah 31:31-34, Ezekiel 36:22-32, Romans 2:24) Just as a couple isn't just married when they are together, we are legally betrothed spiritually to Jesus now and forever, IF we belong to Him. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. 22 In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. Ephesians 2:19-22

Let's give Him the sincere, heartfelt devotion that He deserves and BE READY for when He returns for those who are His. God has not changed. He still hates what He always hated even though we are now under grace, not the law (which has been fulfilled on our behalf by Jesus). Our motivation to obey is all that has changed. We now obey out of love and gratitude for our free salvation rather than out of fear. That is, if we DO truly love Him?

Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, 7 rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. Colossians 2:6-7

For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, 5 and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, 6 and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. 7 For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. 8 But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned. 9 Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation. 10 For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do. 11 And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, 12 so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises. Hebrews 6:4-12

"Gird your loins [be prepared] and keep your lamps burning, 36 and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open to him at once when he comes and knocks. 37 Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them. 38 If he comes in the second watch, or in the third, and finds them awake, blessed are those servants! 39 But know this, that if the master of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have left his house to be broken into. 40 You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect." Luke 12:35-40

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, 7 so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 8 Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, 9 obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. 1 Peter 1:6-9

Jesus simplified the commands for us into two, because by fulfilling these two, the rest will be fulfilled in spirit. It all comes down to love. If we love God first, most and best then we will love who He loves as well: our neighbor. If we love our neighbors as ourselves, then we will not do anything to harm them, including sinning against them OR causing them to sin in any way. (Matthew 18:7, Romans 1:32) We will want to serve them as Jesus showed us by His

example both in His earthly ministry to the sick and when He washed the disciples' feet (our "brothers"). (John 13:12-17)

And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 36 "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" 37 And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. 38 This is the great and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. 40 On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." Matthew 22:35-40

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9 For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. 11 Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. 12 The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. 13 Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. 14 But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. Romans 13:8-14

Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. 2 For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. 3 For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; 4 that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, 5 not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; 6 that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. 7 For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. 8 Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you. 9 Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, 10 for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, 11 and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, 12 so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one. 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

If we use artificial sweeteners, we want our sweets without the cost of the calories. If we claim to love Jesus and yet follow our own way in our lives instead of submitting to Him as Lord, then we are doing the same thing. We want the eternal promises God made to true followers of Christ to be ours, but we don't want to actually suffer the inconvenience of being a disciple. Jesus said that if we love anyone or anything more than Him, we are not worthy of Him. (Matthew 16:24-26, Luke 9:62) If we're not willing to take up our cross and FOLLOW Him, we aren't worthy of Him. (Since when is "following" defined as doing something only in your head or only with your mouth? Isn't it an action verb?) God is true and faithful and genuine toward us, and that is what He expects us to be toward Him.

"Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. 38 And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39 Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." Matthew 10:37-39

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. 3 For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. 5 Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. 6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming. 7 In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. 8 But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices 10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. 11 Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all. 12 Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, 13 bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. 17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. 18 Wives, submit to your husbands, as*

is fitting in the Lord. 19 Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. 20 Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. 21 Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged. 22 Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, 24 knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. 25 For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality. Colossians 3:1-25

*I must clarify here that "forgiving" does not mean tolerating things God hates, sins that people have no intention of repenting of—people deliberately practicing sin are to be excluded from fellowship with us. At the same time, it also means that we fully restore to fellowship those who do repent. The only unforgivable sin is unbelief. (1 Corinthians 5, 2 Corinthians 2, 1 John 1:9)

But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. 4 Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. 5 For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. 6 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. 7 Therefore do not be partners with them. 8 For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light 9 (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) 10 and find out what pleases the Lord. 11 Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. 12 It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. Ephesians 5:3-12

Most people say they didn't like the taste of artificial sweeteners at first, but they got used to it. The problem with that is that artificial sweeteners they don't contain any energy to fuel the body. They also are frequently found to cause other health issues than the weight problems they were designed to help. In the same way, when we get used to the artificial love offered by many professing Christians to God--empty words of devotion and feeble attempts to obey Him with an ever-ready excuse as to why it isn't possible--our faith will shrivel up and waste away so that we will be unable to resist temptation or withstand trials (Luke 8:13, 1 Cor. 10:13). Our faith may become more fake than real, being poisoned with false teachings so that we are unable to discern truth from error. (Romans 1:18-32, 12:2, 1 Cor. 2:14, 13:4-7, Ephesians 4:11-25, 5:1-21, Philippians 1:9-10, 2 Thess. 2:9-12, Hebrews 5:14) That is

NOT healthy for the Body of Christ. (Rom 12:4-5, 1 Cor. 6, 10:16-17, 12:12-27, Ephesians 1:22-23, 3:6, 4:4-6, 4:11-16, 5:23, 5:29-32, Col. 1:18, 1:24)

You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. 4 You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. 5 Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? 6 But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." 7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you. James 4:3-10

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. 11 Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. 12 For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. 13 Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. 14 Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, 15 and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. 16 In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; 17 and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, 18 praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, 19 and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, Ephesians 6:10-19

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. 15 Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. 16 Only let us hold true to what we have attained. 17 Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according

to the example you have in us. 18 For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. 19 Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. 20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. Philippians 3:12-21

God is our ONLY hope in this world and the next. Let's consume the pure, unadulterated Bread of Life DAILY (Matt. 6:11) so that we can bring forth the kind of fruit that leads not only to eternal life for ourselves (Rom. 6:22, 1 Col. 1:9-14), but shines His light on others around us so they can come to know Him, too. (Matt. 5:14-16, Romans 12, Ephesians 5:6-21, Philippians 2:12-16, 2 Tim. 2:24-26) Let's not let the world, who doesn't even KNOW God (John 14:17, Titus 1:16, 1 John 3:1, 1 John 4:6-8), tell us what is best or even acceptable. Let's put ALL of our trust in God (1 Peter 4:19), all day, every day until He returns. This life is short but what comes next lasts forever. (Matt. 25:46, John 3:16, 3:36, 5:24, 6:27, 6:40, 6:47, 6:63, 10:28, 12:25, Romans 2:7, 6:22, Gal. 6:8, 1 Tim. 6:12, 1 Peter 1:3-5, 1 John 2:25, 5:11-13, Jude 1:20-21) Let's not look back with regrets, wondering why we settled for anything fake when we know God is pure, holy and 100% true. (Matt. 22:16, John 1:14-17, 3:33, 7:18, 8:26, 14:6, 15:26, 16:13, Titus 1:2) He is faithful and deserving of our faithfulness in return. (1 Cor. 1:9, 10:19, 1 Thess. 5:24, 2 Thess. 3:3, Heb. 2:17, 3:6, 10:23, 1 Peter 4:19, 1 John 1:9, Rev. 1:5, 3:14, 19:11)

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 34 "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" 35 "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" 36 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. Romans 11:33-36

We can't have both our way and His, both the world and heaven--there is a choice to be made. Jesus is the bread of life and the living water--the ONLY way to receive eternal life. *"It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life."* John 6:63 (See all of John 6, John 4) He finished His work in establishing this covenant, which has been offered to both Jew and Gentile in this age. (Matthew 12:18, Acts 10, Romans 11:25, Galatians 3:28, Hebrews 8) He took ALL of our sins upon Himself to make us right with God. (1 John 2:2, 2 Corinthians 5:21) It's up to us whether we will drink of the cup of the new covenant or not. We remember the price He paid for us when we observe the Lord's Supper. (Luke 22:14-20,

1 Corinthians 11:23-32) He literally bought us with His blood. (Please read 1 Corinthians 6.) God draws us to Himself and invites us to drink, but He doesn't force us to accept His invitation. (John 6:44, 15:16) If we honestly WANT to love, serve, honor and obey Jesus as our spiritual bridegroom but don't know where to begin, let's read our Bibles and pray. God will reveal Himself to us when we seek Him with a pure heart. (Matthew 5:8, Hebrews 7:23-25,) REAL food for thought... (not imitation).

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. 38 Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" 39 Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. John 7:37-39

And he said to me, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. 11 Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy." 12 "Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. 13 I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." 14 Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. 15 Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. 16 "I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star." 17 The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price. 18 I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, 19 and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. 20 He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! 21 The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen. Revelation 22:10-21

But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. 1 Timothy 1:5

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Be wretched and mourn

and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you. James 4:7-10

And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, 16 "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds," 17 then he adds, "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more." 18 Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin. 19 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, 20 by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. 26 For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, 27 but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. 28 Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. 29 How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? 30 For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." 31 It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. 32 But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, 33 sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. 34 For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. 35 Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. 36 For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. 37 For, "Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; 38 but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him." 39 But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls. Hebrews 10:15-39

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2 And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. 5 "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. 6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. 7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. 8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. 9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. 10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. 13 "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. 14 "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. 17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. 18 For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. 19 Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 5:1-19

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