

Do As Jesus Did

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 29 September 2024

Preacher: Rev. Dr. Russell Herbert

[0 : 00] The title of this morning's message, as you probably saw on the screen just there, is Do As Jesus Did. And if I'm honest with you, I really don't like it.

It makes me feel really, really uncomfortable. Which is rather bizarre, because I chose it. I'll tell you why it makes me feel a little bit uncomfortable, but first let me say why it's in the series.

We're thinking about discipleship, and being a disciple of Jesus, being an apprentice to Jesus, as we said a few weeks ago, is about following him, about walking in his way, about striving to be like Jesus, and to do as Jesus did.

It's a key theme in Christian discipleship. And we've got it here in God's word. Whoever claims to live in him must do as Jesus did.

It's not the only place we find that. I mean, Paul says in Ephesians chapter 5, be imitators of God. So what's my problem? Why does it make me feel so uncomfortable, this command to do as Jesus did?

[1 : 27] Well, in some ways it feels unrealistic. It feels unattainable. You know, I don't think, hand on heart, I could really imitate Mother Teresa, who gave up everything to work in the slums of Calcutta, serving the poorest of the poor.

I don't think I would have the courage to imitate Martin Luther King, who gave his life standing up for racial and social justice and equality.

And these are amazing human beings. But they're human beings. But Jesus, to do as Jesus did. Come on. It almost seems something quite incredulous as well about, when you think of the life of Jesus and the things he did, recorded in the Gospels.

I mean, honestly, next time we have a church social event, we get on to the discussion of the catering arrangements. I'm picturing, does this really mean that we have a staff team meeting about it?

[2 : 43] And we end up saying, don't worry about booking anyone. Well, I'll pop into Lidl's beforehand and pick up a pack of rolls and a couple of tins of sardines. My mum lives on the Isle of Wight.

That's where I grew up. We go and visit her several times a year. Next time we go, do we rock up at Portsmouth, park the car and walk across? Sounds like I'm being facetious and I'm saying this tongue-in-cheek, of course.

By the way, I really do believe in miracles. I've seen them. But when I hear that command, you must do as Jesus did, I can't help just feeling, come on, that's just unrealistic.

But that's what we're told. Whoever claims to live in him, says John, must do as Jesus did.

So what does that mean? Well, if, like me, you feel slightly overwhelmed by that challenge, be reassured that whatever else it means, it is shot through with realism.

[3 : 59] Because in the preceding verses in 1 John, he writes, My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin.

But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous one. So there is a realism in those opening verses.

And John is quite clearly saying that we are not Jesus. He is our advocate. And there's an acceptance there that we are sinful, broken beings.

That's the reality. So if there is that realism about it, what does he mean?

What is John saying when he says, live as Jesus did? One of the things I found really helpful in John Mark Comer's book, Practising the Way, was how he draws attention to that phrase, well, what would Jesus do?

[5 : 06] You know, something that in recent decades has become a go-to phrase, that that's what being a follower of Jesus is, is living by that code, if you like. What would Jesus do?

And WWJD. And it's an easily memorable thing. Well, what would Jesus do in this situation? And it is a helpful approach. But John Mark Comer actually challenges it and says, in some ways it can mislead us because Jesus was the son of God.

He was a rabbi living 2,000 years ago in a different culture than our own. And in some ways a better phrase, although it would be a mouthful, was not what would Jesus do, but what would Jesus do if he was you?

Kind of amounts to the same thing, but it does accentuate the important thing here. That as we seek to live out this challenge, to do as Jesus did, it's about you being the person that God has created, that God calls and God invites and challenges to be a follower of Jesus today.

Facing your situations, your circumstances, your struggles, and they will be unique to you. So through that lens, what does it mean to do as Jesus does?

[6 : 33] Let's remember that the gospel is not about rules. So if we think for a moment that actually the command to do as Jesus does is a list of rules, then we're missing the point.

The gospel never has been about rules. It has always been about relationship. Relationship with the living God. And this passage from 1 John is all about not only how we know him, but how we know that we know him.

So to live as Jesus did invites us into that deeper knowledge of how it is that we know him.

See, we too, like Jesus, and this is what I want to suggest is what John is really driving towards. We too, like Jesus, can know God as Father.

And that, I would like to suggest, is what doing as Jesus did is all about. It's about knowing God as Father.

[8 : 01] Notice that I say knowing God as Father, not calling God Father. Now, we should call God Father, of course, but to call God Father is not enough.

You see, sometimes people will say that some of the language that we sing in some of our worship songs where we sing the praises of God our Father is a bit wishy-washy and sentimentalist.

Of course, it can be if we just call God Father. You know, Christian faith can be accused of being sentimentalism if it's just about calling God Father.

We use it in the Lord's Prayer. We use the language in many of our worship songs. But again, we miss the point. If we think the gospel is just about calling God Father, it does involve that.

But more fundamentally, the reason we can call God Father is because we can know God as Father. And that's where it is most definitely not sentimentalism or wishy-washy thinking.

[9 : 14] You see, properly understood, calling, it's not about calling God the Father, but knowing God as Father. And when we know God as Father, and herein lies the distinction, it is about submission to Him.

You see, anyone can use the language and say, well, Father God. But what we're talking about here is a spiritual posture where we know that God is the one who loves us infinitely.

And because God loves us infinitely, He makes that claim over us and calls us, invites us to submit to Him. So when John says here, we know we have come to know Him if we keep His commands, what he is talking about is that when we submit to God as our Father, when we accept that God loves you intimately as His child.

Then you submit to that reality. God ceases to be some distant moral being that we can't know in any personal way.

And instead calls us into an intimate, loving relationship where we know that everything He does towards us is out of love. But that involves submission.

[10 : 44] Not out of rules, but out of relationship. If you're going to know that relationship, if you're going to know that relationship, you will naturally submit to that dynamic. We know we have come to know Him if we keep His commands.

You see, when we submit to His authority, when we commit His commands, that's when we know that we know Him as Father. When I was 18 years old, went off to become a student studying theology.

It was not training to be a minister. It was studying theology as an academic subject. It was the first time I'd experienced teaching of thinking about God at the hands of atheists.

They weren't all atheists, but some of them were. And one particular one most definitely was. One of my tutors. He taught us the philosophy of religion. And he was a very outspoken atheist. And he was quite open about his mission that he was on to de-Christianize everyone in that year. I really struggled with this.

[12:02] I'd not encountered this before. This guy knew so much more than I did. He'd read so many more books. He just knew all his philosophy. He seemed to know his way around theological debate and discussion.

And yet he was vehement, passionately vehement that there was no God and that it made no sense to believe in God. How on earth will we just stand up to that? I remember writing to a minister that I knew, the church where I'd grown up in.

He wrote back to me something that I'll never forget. He said, at the end of the day, it all boils down to being one of two different postures.

And every single one of us will be one of these two things. And you must choose as to which you are. He said, either you can choose to stand in authority over the word of God.

Or you can allow the word of God to stand in authority over you. I'll say that again because this is really important.

[13:19] Every single one of us will fall into one of two categories. Either our approach is one by which we, whether we are aware we do this or not, but we consciously or unconsciously stand in authority over God's word.

And see it as that's something there, but we stand over it. And we can pull things out of it and put things back into it, but we make that judgment over it. Or we see God's word as, in a mysterious way, taking an authority over us.

And ultimately, every single one of us will be in one of those two categories. Now I'm aware that some things can't be oversimplified, that there are a lot of grey areas in life, I totally get that.

But this is one single truth that I come back to over and over and over again. Either you stand in judgment over God's word, or you allow God's word to stand in judgment over you.

Now, let us be really clear. When I talk about God's word standing in judgment over us, submitting to his authority, let me say what I don't mean, and what this ministerial friend of mine didn't mean either.

[14:39] We're not talking about just a blithe submission, a kind of fundamentalist stance where we exercise no critical judgment whatsoever.

We're not talking about that. Of course, when we read scripture, we need to understand what it means. We don't just take everything literally at face value. Of course, when we read the Bible, we need to understand it and its context, and we need to exercise critical judgment over it, we need to evaluate it, we need to read commentaries, we need to understand its social context in which it was written.

And indeed, the Bible itself is not just one book, it was written over many centuries by lots of different people. I'm not for one moment dismissing the importance of critical reading of the Bible. What I am talking about is a posture of spirit, that as we engage in that enterprise of reading the Bible, what's our approach?

Do we simply see it as something that we will exercise judgment over, that we have authority over? Or do we see God's word as having authority over us?

[15:53] Because I want to suggest that that is what John is talking about here, when he says, we know we have come to know him if we keep his commands.

If we are willing to accept God as father, that is a relationship dynamic by which we yield our control over our past, our present and our future, over to him, as the higher power over us.

And whilst we may have all sorts of questions that we continue to wrestle with, moral questions, questions of why things happen in life, that we will take to eternity, I'm sure, and there we will find the answers.

But whilst in this life, we may still wrestle with those things, ultimately, it comes down to that question. Do we accept his authority over us?

Or do we, in so subtle ways, try to have authority over him? The invitation of the gospel, of course, is to yield authority to him, to submit to him.

[17:12] Because when we do that, when we see God's word as the one that has authority over us, when we accept God as father who watches over us in love, and yield to his authority, things are

different.

Now that, of course, is not the culture in which we live. People think we are absolutely crazy when we talk about submitting, in that kind of way, to God as the one who has authority over us. It cuts right against the instinct of our cultural flow. The kind of more popular understanding is that, you know, you're in charge of your decisions, you must take charge of things, and you must follow where your instincts lead you.

That you must go where your heart leads you. Trust your heart and follow its lead. Now that may make for wonderful lyrics in a Disney song.

But it doesn't always get us into the right place. There can be dangers when we simply follow the leading of the heart.

[18 : 31] But the gospel expects so much more for our lives. Promises so much more. Reassures us that life can be so much bigger.

Than just following the guiding of our own internal world. So what does it look like then, in practical terms, to submit to God's commands?

Well, it means loving, behaving, making choices in ways that can be quite painful at times.

Because, because John says quite clearly here, that if we claim to know God as Father, and to walk in his light, and yet harbour hatred towards others, well, you just can't do it.

It doesn't work. Now, this is challenging. It's really challenging stuff, and let's not pretend otherwise. C.S. Lewis offered some really practical wisdom.

[19 : 45] He said this, do not waste your time bothering whether you love your neighbour. Just act as if you did.

As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love them.

If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking them more. If you do them a good turn, you will find yourself disliking them less.

To do as Jesus did. To submit to the Father. To know the difference that that makes.

Often involves making difficult choices. And in practical terms, that will look different for each and every one of us at different points in our lives. But it's what we're called to do.

[20 : 54] I'm going to pray about this in just a moment. I just want to share with you one final story, an image. When Tamara and I were in the very early stages of parenthood.

I'll never forget the first time we took our eldest child, Charlie, to have his first vaccination. We were living in Devon at the time. I can't remember how old he would have been, but he was tiny.

I remember we took him into the surgery and it wasn't our normal GP, it was a locum doctor that was there on that day. And as he was getting ready with this syringe, he turned to us and he looked at our little baby boy and then looked at us and said, I hate doing this.

So why did he do it? Why would a human being stick a needle in an innocent child?

Why would he do it? When everything inside him hates doing it, why would he do that? For the same reason that throughout our lives we face situations where there are things that we don't feel like doing.

[22 : 26] Where our hearts might draw us in one direction. but where we know that actually when we do those things that we don't feel like doing but we do them, things will be so much better.

We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands. Let's pray. As we come to pray, let's think right now of any decisions that we might be battling with, struggling with, facing. Let's just picture those decisions before God. And ask ourselves the question, what does it mean to do as Jesus does in those situations?

Knowing that it might mean making some very painful, costly decisions. Things that don't come naturally or easily.

Lord, as we hold our lives before you now, grant us the courage to see things as they really are.

[24 : 10] help us to understand that we are faced with a choice.

Either we stand in authority over you and your claims and all the things that the Bible will tell us, or we can allow you to take authority over us.

Lord, sometimes it's really complex to work out what that looks like on the ground of everyday life as we face choices and work things out in relationships and make decisions. Lord, help us in the midst of all of it to know that you only want the best for us, that you love us unconditionally and that you long for us to call you Father but so much more than just call you Father, to actually know you

as Father.

Lord, help us to do as Jesus does. to not just call you Father but to live in relationship with you as Father.

Thank you that we have that awesome privilege being able to know that we know you. So give us the courage as we face our decisions, as we face the challenges of everyday life to do as Jesus did. [25 : 58] to know you as Father and to live in that relationship. In his name we pray.

Amen.