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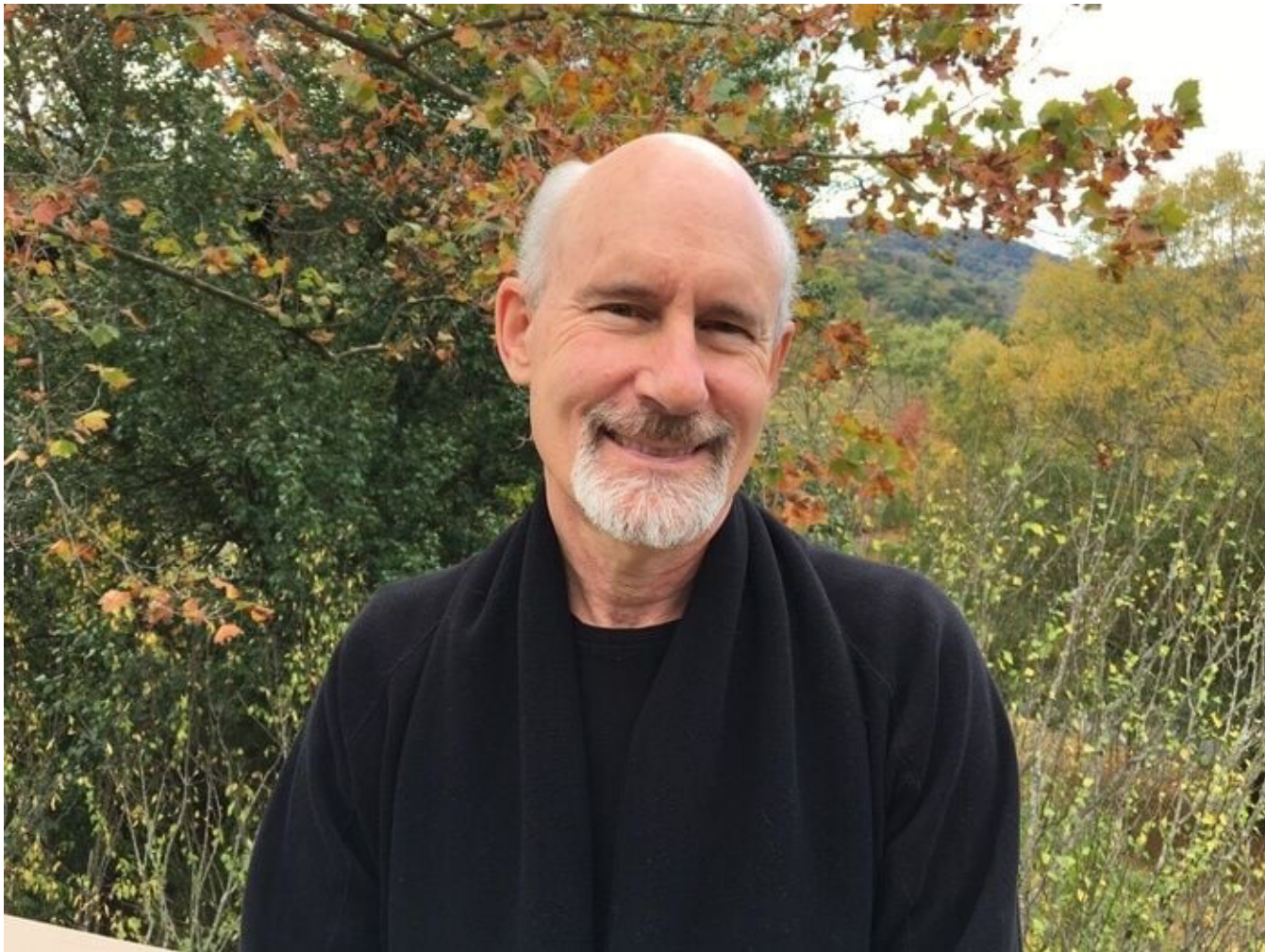
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Friendly Freethinker: Is The Greatest Command to Love, or Not?

By Chris Highland
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Some conversations can quickly turn in a circle. Around and around, back and forth, no end in sight. Until, you end it, or the other ends it, or it simply hits a wall and ends itself. There's nothing like social media to fall into that dizzying trap. A "conversation" or real discussion isn't actually possible, only a battle of keyboards—wielding the weapons of clicks and emojis. Quite unsatisfying, though I admit I trip into that trap from time to time, especially when I can't help myself because someone has written something so "out there" I feel compelled to respond. I'm not always pleased I took the bait.

I recently posted something in response to a comment calling for the reversal of the Supreme Court decision allowing same-sex marriage. While some were posting Bible verses, one person said they were “called to be holy.” I wrote: “You may believe you are ‘called,’ but many are not.” Another commenter said: “Why can’t Christians follow the teachings of the Bible?” I replied: “No one is saying you can’t do that. But not everyone believes like you do.” Honestly, I don’t know why I feel the need to respond to these things. I’m well aware I won’t be changing anyone’s mind, and frankly, I don’t care if I do or don’t. It’s more of a “screen game,” I suppose. We toss around our opinions like mudballs, just making things muddier, and getting dirty.

One response I tossed out before logging out, was a reply to a comment on Christians following the Bible. All I said was: “And the greatest commandment is. . .” Even with my background in biblical studies and years in ministry, I still don’t get how some believers ignore clear instructions about the “heart of the good news.” At least that’s how I see it. Some folks can’t seem to notice how they pick and choose verses, mix in their personal and political opinions, and throw in something a pastor (or televangelist) told them, and end up with a half-baked cake of nonsense.

So, what about that “greatest commandment” from the Man of Nazareth? If the “bottom line” (or “top shelf” version) of true faith and following is evidenced by a loving life, what do believers do with all these “culture war” issues? To each their own, I guess. Yet, my years as a chaplain and teacher cause me to ask hard questions, dissatisfied with easy answers based on hand-me-down beliefs. When someone claims a court decision or legislation “goes against the Bible” or at least their understanding of the Bible, we need to hear more than quotations. Civil society is not a church. A pluralistic society under a secular Constitution can’t simply refer to a religious text to shape laws to guide everyone. Jesus’ own “law of love” can’t be legislated, but those who seek to live “biblically,” and those who seek to live ethical lives, can choose to be guided by that ancient command.

However, can love be commanded, demanded or handed down as a rule? I don’t think so. Love is a choice. Some may believe that love means they are free to judge others, believing they can “love them into changing.” Sure, we may feel someone we care about is harming themselves, so we love them enough to encourage change. These are people we know and care about. We love them and want good in their lives. But we can’t change them, because it’s up to them. We can’t force anyone to live the way we wish they would. So, love is perhaps a hopeful encouragement because we honestly care for another person.



Once again, this kind of love can’t be a “law” or command. It’s a choice that has to be made rationally, sensitively, with the good of the other person in mind. Love isn’t merely soft sweetness (though that’s nice). It seems to me the kind of love Jesus talked about was difficult (“love your enemies”!) and deeply personal, one individual at a time, and never something to knock someone over the head with. “I love you, so you better love me” or “You better believe what I believe, or else!” How can that be called love?

When I spar with someone, verbally or in writing, it’s interesting to see how mentioning the “Great Commandment” (rather than the “Great Commission” to save the world) elicits a kind of “Yes, but” response. I get the sense people think “Love one another ... Yes, but. . .” or “God is Love ... Ok, but. . .” These may be nice to repeat in church, but don’t really apply outside the stained-glass walls. All I can say is that our lives are either ruled by loving-kindness, or we’re just engaged in endless and pointless battles of distraction.

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