

Jesus Loves Me (This I'm Told)

Steve Cuno

It was divine intervention, I tell you. I was driving along, belting out "Nobody Loves Me" with operatic gusto, when a "Jesus loves you" billboard stopped me halfway through the part about eating worms. For proof, it cited one of two Bible texts perpetually poised on the tips of ardent Christian tongues: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." (The other text doesn't concern us here.)

The good news caught me off guard, for Jesus had never struck me as all that lovey-dovey. But I am loath to argue with billboards, so I resolved to reread the Gospels in search of the love fest I must have missed before. I passed on the rest of the New Testament, less because one-third to one-half of the Epistles are probable forgeries and more because slogging through them is a pain. And don't get me started on Revelation, a geopolitical rant of its time that reads like a guided tour of an acid trip.

No disrespect to the intervening divinity, but rereading the Gospels left me unimpressed. The authors put love in Jesus's mouth only thirteen times. Not thirteen *different* times, mind you; they recycled much of the same material. And quite a few passages *using* the word love aren't about love. "You cannot love God and mammon," for instance, is about conflicting priorities.

A good deal of the time, Jesus expressed not love but exasperation (*How long shall I put up with you?*), threats (*Watch out or it's off to Gehenna with you*), name-calling (*Hypocrites! Whited sepulchers! Vipers!*), and deepities (*Drink water and you'll thirst again, Don't build houses on sand, and Putting a lamp under a bushel isn't the most efficient way to light a room*).

As for Jesus's advice, it didn't exactly brim with love, and it fell woefully short in terms of practicality. *Hate your family. Tear*

out your eye. Cut off your hand. If you're going to lust, divorce, or remarry, you might as well commit adultery. Birds and flowers don't punch a time clock, so don't fret about food or clothing. Persecution is grand. Be sure bullies clobber both sides of your face. Bless your enemies. (Take that, Ukraine.) If a town rejects your preaching, shake the dust from your feet so they'll fare worse than Sodom and Gomorrah, but forgive everyone else—not because it's virtuous, but because God won't forgive you if you don't.

Perhaps riddle-speak shows love. Here, Jesus excelled. *You must be born again. Birds eat seeds on hard ground. Don't store new wine in old bottles or sew new fabric onto old. Nobody knows the son but the father and the father but the son. Non-salty salt is worthless. Drink my water and never thirst again. Better yet, eat my body and drink my blood.* (Ewww.) Trouble is that Jesus's riddles usually baffled rather than enlightened. The idea was to keep people from understanding him—explained the guy who predicated salvation upon understanding him.

Maybe we should focus more on Jesus's deeds. Let's see. Jesus flogged merchants and overturned their tables. He promised to bring war. He used slave-beating to illustrate godly wrath without adding, "But seriously, folks, don't enslave people and for Pete's sake don't beat them, lol." He told a Canaanite that exorcising her daughter's demon would be like giving children's bread to dogs. He told a Samaritan she'd be damned because she wasn't a Jew. (Neither are Christians. Hmm.) He showed more mercy to demons than to swine and swineherds. Instead of thanking his host for a free meal, he whined about not getting a kiss or footbath. He refused to receive his mom and brothers. He ordered his disciples to steal a donkey. He freaking murdered a defenseless tree.

Now, fairness demands acknowledging the good things that Jesus did. For instance, he healed people of diseases and disabilities. Such count as acts of love, provided you ignore the fact that Jesus and/or his dad handed out diseases and disabilities in the first place and you don't think too hard about the vast majority of people whom all-powerful Jesus could have helped but didn't.

Jesus was no slouch when it came to showmanship. After a forty-day couples retreat in the desert with Satan, he changed water into wine. Cool trick, but the only love it showed was for a good party. When the Pharisees challenged him on forgiving the sins of a man who couldn't walk, Jesus said, "Hold my beer," and healed the man. Writing in the dirt before sparing a woman taken in adultery artfully added tension to the story. And if it's drama you like, there's no topping bleeding at every pore. If only the earliest Gospel autographs talked about the dirt-writing, the woman-sparing, or the pore-bleeding. They don't. Someone came up with those anecdotes centuries later.

But wait! Remember what the billboard said! Jesus gave his life for us! I admit that would be way impressive ... if Jesus had stayed dead. But a day and a half later, which his publicists spin as three days, he was up and at 'em again. Jesus didn't give his life. He set it aside for thirty-six hours.

I think "Jesus loves you" needs to go. Luckily, the Gospels offer some worthy replacements. I quite like this one: *Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door.*

Imagine the blessed silence. **■**

Steve Cuno's latest book is *Behind the Mormon Curtain: Selling Sex in America's Holy City*, an in-depth look (with the occasional touch of humor) at sex work among Mormons in Utah.