

# Be Salty: A Top Ten Teachings List for Jesus

(for Kate ☺)

January 16, 2020 – David R. Weiss

Every “Top Ten” list is a bit of a farce. In any category rich enough to merit a “top ten” list, there’s likely such an abundance of richness as to make choosing the top ten both challenging and debatable.

But maybe that’s okay. One of the great insights our Jewish siblings can offer toward Scripture is that it’s an excellent place to start an argument (or at least to spur an impassioned conversation). While many Christians see Scripture as offering a definitive last word on some topic, Jewish rabbis are adamant that Scripture is so ambiguously (divinely?) rich, that its greatest gift is often to spark conversations in which the voice of “the God who is still speaking” can be heard. That last phrase is from the United Church of Christ, but it seems to echo that same Jewish rabbinic wisdom.

Thus, without claiming that it’s definitive, here is my list of Jesus’ Top Ten Teachings. Hopefully, it will offer a bit of insight into the richness that swirls around Jesus from a progressive Christian perspective. And if it starts a few arguments, all the better! ☺ **NOTE: I’ve provided a few reflection questions and a summary of biblical sources at the end of this piece.**

At the heart of Jesus’ ministry is his call to discipleship. The gospels agree that there was a circle of disciples who directly responded to Jesus’ call, “Come, follow me.” But beyond this, within his own ministry, within the early church, throughout history, and into the present moment, the power of Jesus’ message is that it calls out again and again, asking us to join in God’s loving transformation of the world. So, one way to think about this list is to frame it thus: If you hear the call of Jesus in your life, and if you’re considering his request that you “Come, follow me,” this is an inkling of what it might mean to say, Yes. But also with this caveat: It’s easy to back away if all you consider is the “end game,” the culmination—the cost—of discipleship. But Jesus is inviting you *on a journey*—and one undertaken small step by small step, *and in the good company of others*. Saying Yes is choosing not only to follow Jesus, but to join the fellowship of others who’ve also chosen this life-affirming Yes.

Here’s my list. What would yours look like?

**10** **God loves you. Unconditionally. Extravagantly. Now.** You might say this is really #1, and I won’t argue. It is absolutely the driving force of Jesus’ ministry and message. *This is the gospel.* I put it at #10 because it makes all the others possible. Everything else Jesus teaches hinges on this declaration. We see this as much in his deeds as in his words. Particularly in his healings and in his table fellowship (the company he kept and the community he built over food). In both cases Jesus chose to restore wholeness to persons who were social outcasts and often seen as cursed by God. This pronounced and practiced declaration of God’s love is the absolute heart of Jesus’ teaching. If he doesn’t say this, nothing else he says matters. And, if this is true, then everything else he says spells out the difference this makes.

**9** **The two great commandments: To love God with all your being, and to love your neighbor as yourself.** With these words Jesus affirms and embraces the depth of his Jewish heritage, asserting that these two commandments sum up the teaching of the Torah and the passion of the prophets. But the word “commandment” falls ... a bit short. Even in Exodus, when Moses receives the Decalogue—literally the “Ten Words”—on Mount Sinai, he records these ten divine utterances using verbal forms that can be translated *either* as imperatives (commands) or as future indicatives (promises that declare what will be). Likely nuances of both meanings ring true. The prophets rail against Israel for failing to live up to these expectations, and yet they also imagine a time—within history—when these words of command/promise are written on our hearts. Powered—liberated—by God’s unconditional, extravagant love, these two Promises sum up what life *can* look like.

**8** **Be clear on your loyalties.** Loving God with all your being doesn’t mean you can’t love others; in fact, it compels you to love them, too. But Jesus also instructs us to be clear on where our loyalties lie. This matters because loving God and neighbor is essentially and

unmistakably a political agenda. Politics is just a fancy word for how any set of people (from small community to nation-state) chooses *to hold and share power*. God's politics (from the Exodus through the prophets on to Jesus) are about breaking systems of oppression and placing power in service of the most vulnerable.

Jesus says quite starkly, you can't serve two masters: if your loyalty lies with a liberating God, you have to be "all in" *because God is "all in."* When Jesus is questioned about paying tribute to Caesar, his response is a master class in loyalty. After asking *whose image* is on the coin, he responds, "Then give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." It seems like a way of carving out a sphere where human rulers reign supreme, but that's because we listen from a place that assumes, of course some things "must" belong to Caesar. But in Jewish thought *all things* belong to God; humans especially bear *God's image*. For Jesus, obedience to *any* Caesar is always provisional, and whenever earthly rulers or structures act to harm humanity or creation they intrude on God's sphere, and our loyalty is at play.

**7 Live simply, that others might simply live.** The phrase is attributed to Elizabeth Ann Seton (1774-1821), and later echoed by both Gandhi and Mother Theresa, but its pedigree goes all the way back to Jesus. Perhaps most memorably in his admonition to be mindful of what we treasure because our heart will follow. He also observed that children, in their simplicity, wonder, and trust model virtues for discipleship. He cautions against letting anxiety over daily needs keep us from being present to this moment. In fact, the petition for "daily bread" in the Lord's Prayer reminds us to let enough be enough. (The words may well echo the sense of manna, which was literally "daily bread": sufficient for a single day, but rotten if you tried to hoard it.)

The parables of the Rich Fool and the Rich Man and Lazarus both show the folly of misplaced priorities. And the rich young man, who is "this close" to the Kingdom, falters when he realizes how material things have entangled the best aspirations of his heart. In Matthew's account Jesus prefaces his counsel to the young man to sell his possessions, give to the poor, and then follow Jesus, "If you would be *perfect ...*" We hear it as the bar for sainthood, unrealistic in its invitation to most of us. But wait. Acts tells us the early Christians were convinced that holding all things in common was possible. Then again, they customarily addressed fellow Christians—ordinary folks like you and me—as saints. If you take #10, #9, and #8 seriously, it's hard to see how the accumulation of personal wealth becomes a sign of success. For Jesus it appears to be the measure by which you have missed the mark.

**6 Sometimes anger is holy.** True, Jesus' message is characterized as "gospel," as good news that reaches down into our souls and wraps us individually—but more so communally (we were after all, created for community)—in God's extravagant love. But occasionally we see Jesus "lose it." The most dramatic occasion is when he enters the outer courts of the Temple and sees those selling animals for sacrifice and changing money for paying Temple taxes. He responds in a holy fit of frenzy, overturning their tables and driving out the animals. His complaint—which would ring even more true of many mega churches and TV evangelists today—is that such practices aim to profit on God's freely-offered extravagant love.

The same anger fills Jesus' words against the Pharisees. But a word of caution is in order here. Matthew amplifies the tension between Jesus and the Pharisees as part of his gospel spin some five decades after Jesus lived. Let it suffice to say that in every religious tradition there are persons and propensities that are willing to twist divine grace into a transaction and set themselves up as gatekeepers able to pocket profit or power along the way. In fact, when Jesus sends his disciples out to preach and heal, he tells him, "You received without pay; give without pay." That may not be a workable model in a modern economy, but when it comes to how religious traditions "communicate" God, Jesus displays a focused fury: if you are not declaring in word and deed the gracious, free, welcoming love of God, well, prepare for your tables to be overturned. And sometimes turning over tables is what it looks like to follow Jesus.

**5 Do. Or do not. There is no try.** Okay, that's Yoda (in *The Empire Strikes Back*), but it *could've* been Jesus. In a multitude of ways he says that faith—following Jesus as an improvisational riff on the truth of God's love—is finally *a matter of what we do*, not what we say or what hear. Even in the context of his healings he notes that pronouncing forgiveness matters little if one's stigma and isolation are not overcome. The doing is the fruit, and it reveals the health (or its lack) in the tree. This doing—this enacting good news to others—involves ready attentiveness ... but without any clear signs. What ought I do? And when? Jesus intimates that if we see him in each person we encounter we'll likely have little doubt about what to do. Though perhaps the real miracle—should we dare to imagine it—is *not* to meet Jesus in “the least of these,” *but to meet each least person as themselves*.

**4 Go ahead, be cheeky.** These instructions from Jesus about turning the other cheek (followed quickly by surrendering your cloak and walking that second mile) seem to suggest that discipleship is just another way to spell “doormat.” But nothing could be further from the truth. Each instance—being struck by a back-handed slap on the left cheek, being required to offer your own coat as collateral for a “payday” loan, and being “asked” to lug a Roman soldier's backpack for one mile—lifts up a readily recognizable occasion for oppression among Jesus' peasant followers. Humiliation was often the ante for navigating a Roman (and at times Jewish) society distorted by power and status. Each bit of counsel offered by Jesus suggests one possible way of transforming the situation into something new by unveiling the hidden power structure and by nonviolently asserting one's humanity in relationship to one's adversary. When Jesus tells John's disciples to go back and tell the Baptist what they have seen and heard, including among things, that “the poor have good news preached to them,” this is part of that preaching. It is the invitation ... *the urgent instruction* to imagine ways—still today!—to transform oppressive dynamics so that both of those greatest commandment-promises can shine through.

**3 Look, here's a cross ... with your name on it. But.** We've been told too often and too long that Jesus came to offer personal salvation—a guaranteed trip to heaven on the far side of death, if only we believe in him. And that belief in Jesus was set up as something that played out without reference to matters of this world—unless, of course, as the early Christians sometimes were, we were told to renounce that largely abstract conviction that Jesus is my personal savior. This isn't the place to review all the problems with that thinking. But those first Christians were not martyred for an abstract idea—they were martyred because both they and Rome recognized that *following Jesus put one at odds with following Caesar and Rome*.

This is the point at which being clear about your loyalties can get costly. So we need to recognize that when Jesus talks about “taking up your cross,” he isn't suggesting you invest your personal suffering with religious fervor, he's specifically acknowledging that *discipleship means acting out of love in situations where such actions may cost you dearly*. That's what “the cross” is about. (Which is not to say that religious faith cannot help us in facing personal suffering—it's just not appropriate to use “cross” imagery in that regard.)

**And yet.** (You saw that “But” above didn't you?) There is a mystical irony here. And by mystical I mean *something more than natural but not less than real*. Jesus also says it's precisely in these moments that we *gain* our life—that meaning and purpose and fullness overflow. The Beatitudes stand as a counterpoint to the cross, a declaration of sacred cosmic logic—an arc that bends slowly but unflinching in the direction of justice and grace. No doubt these words are heavy, but already alongside them in the gospels we find the exhortation to be fearless, because the God who loves us extravagantly and whose love we mirror in ways that set us at odds with the world—that God accompanies us in every moment, and most especially when there's a cross involved.

**2 I am the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.** This is the only “teaching” drawn from John's gospel. That's because virtually every biblical scholar agrees that John's gospel (the last to be written) carries the least echo of Jesus' historical life and shows the greatest theological interpretation done by later believers. I put this

saying here because it's often been used to harm other persons of faith, Jewish and otherwise, and it's time to reclaim it for good. The immediate context in John's gospel is the disciples' anxiety about losing their bearings, so to speak, after Jesus is gone. Jesus replies by telling them, "You know plenty to keep moving forward on your own. You know *me*—and I am the Way ..."

But, before you presume this means confessing Jesus as your personal savior and ticket to heaven, review #10 through #3 (and maybe take a peek at #1). To say that Jesus is the Way is to say, "Loves wins." No, it *isn't* to say that, it's to *DO THAT*. Which is, in fact, why the earliest Christians were known as "The Way"; because of the pattern of their lived love in community. Jesus is reminding his disciples that *his life*—his embodied extravagant love for others—is both the presence of God streaming through him *and also the sure pathway for them to follow*. A sage no less than Winnie the Pooh knew that he could trust "the rumbly in his tummy" to guide him home to his honey pot. Jesus says the same: if we are lured by love for God, neighbor, and especially "the least of these," we have found the Way and the Truth and the Life—and we are moving in the direction of God.

**1** **Be compassionate ... as God is compassionate.** This is the bookend teaching: the culmination of Jesus' announcement of God's extravagant love. God's love flows from compassion: that being moved so deeply in one's bowels, that one dares to stand in solidarity with another—no matter the cost. No distant deity, this God—*Jesus' God*—chooses to be in our midst. And every other top ten teaching is simply one facet on the surface of this gemstone, this being-in-our-midst God. Indeed, while Luke has Jesus use the word "compassion," Matthew uses the word "perfection" in the same place. "Be perfect as God is perfect." Really? Well, "perfect" also means to reach final/destined form, fulfilled. *The fullness of God is compassion*. And we, who are in the image of God, we also are destined, finally, for compassion. It is equally for us as for God the fullness of who we are. In *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, Jonathan thinks he can reach heaven by flying faster and faster. The wise seagull guiding him tells him, "Heaven is not a place, nor a time. Heaven is being perfect." And then he adds, "Perfect speed is being there." Which sounds a lot like compassion: the art, the commitment, the act of discipleship *of being there*.

So—if you hear the call of Jesus in your life and consider answering his request to "Come, follow me," with a Yes—this list gives you a small taste of what might be in store. But it's hard to imagine ahead of time. *Discipleship is an immersive communal experience*. Certainly among the best, scariest, most meaningful, most mutual, riskiest, most creative, and life-affirming choices you can make. I don't think Christianity is the only redemptive-transformative power afoot in the world. It's simply one distinctive path of wisdom. (And one all too frequently distorted today!) Jesus asks us to be "salt of the earth." From that vantage, perhaps Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Indigenous spiritualities, etc., even Humanism, all offer their own distinctive transformative "spice" to the world. My "top ten" list is one way to imagine what it means for followers of Jesus to "Be salty."

If you haven't noticed, the world could use a little salt today. I say, start shaking it out.

*PS: I've set up a Patreon site to help fund my work in public theology. I hope you'll invest in my thinking and writing. You can learn more about how to support me here: [www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith](http://www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith)*

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## Seeds for reflection and conversation

(Just a few questions that might help spark some inner dialogue or conversation with others in response to “Be Salty: A Top Ten Teachings List for Jesus.” Use as many or as few as you find useful.)

1. Before we think any further about *my* “Top Ten” list, take a moment and consider what *yours* would look like. Don’t worry about coming up with exactly ten, but pause and pose this question to yourself, “If someone asked *me* what were the most important things Jesus taught, *what would I say?*” The first few things that come to mind will reveal a lot, both about how you see Jesus, but also about what you were *taught* about Jesus.
2. Looking at *your* list, can you distinguish between teachings you listed primarily because you learned them from someone else while growing up and those you listed because you’ve poked, prodded, doubted, challenged, wrestled, and lived your way to them yourself? Is there a difference in tone or theme between those two sets of teachings? (Having studied both the Bible and Jesus across 12+ years of college, seminary, and graduate school—and having spent the last 20 years as a working theologian—my list is the result of *lots* of thoughtful wrestling and looks very different than it would have when I was confirmed as a teenager.) It’s also worth thinking about how your list might have changed over time—and what prompted those changes.
3. My list rests entirely on teachings supported by the synoptic gospels (Mark, Matthew, Luke). While even those gospels are *not* biographies and reflect the unique theological spin of their authors, they’re still much more likely than John’s gospel to carry real echoes of Jesus’ actual teachings. (And my list actually draws from a lot of scholarship that tries to get back to those original teachings.) When we think about Jesus, is it important to get as close as we can to what Jesus himself taught? Or is it enough to know what the four gospel writers chose to report? What do you think drove their choices in how they portrayed Jesus? What drives yours?
4. Thinking about my list, were there teachings I named that you were surprised to see there? Were there teachings I named that you *didn’t even know Jesus taught*? Were there any that you would disagree with? What would you say accounts for the differences—or similarities—between my list and your list?
5. Does being Christian mean following Jesus’ teachings? Or does it mean something more or different than this? How many churches do you know where my Top Ten list is a good summary of what the church teaches and what the members believe and practice? Is it possible to follow Jesus’ teachings without being a Christian? (Someone might argue that Gandhi did a better job of following my Top Ten list than most Christians do—what does that say about Gandhi, about most Christians, ... or about my list?)
6. Jesus lived and taught about 2000 years ago. Even if my list captures some of the essence of what he taught, does it still matter for today? Thinking about the challenges we face—such as: climate crisis, economic inequity, racial/gender/LGBTQ injustices, political freedom, challenging medical questions, guns rights, war-terrorism, treatment of animals, artificial intelligence, and more—and the claims of churches like the United Church of Christ that “God is still speaking,” do the teachings on my list offer usable guidance for today? How do such teachings relate to a God who is still speaking?
7. What did you learn, or what do you see more clearly about Jesus—or about yourself—after reflecting on my Top Ten list and these questions?

## A note on sources

I'm not keen on "proof-texting" (the notion that a some set of specific verses can prove a point); no surprise there, given my introduction to the Top Ten list. Nonetheless, all of the teachings I name *do* have roots in Jesus' life as portrayed in the gospels. For ease of reading, I chose not to clutter the list itself with a set of citations, but here's a sense of the passages that support each theme on the list.

**10 God loves you. Unconditionally. Extravagantly. Now.** Saint Francis famously told his followers, "Go, preach the gospel. Use words as needed." His point was that the radical good news brought by Jesus was *more deed than declaration*. If you follow the *action* in the gospels this theme becomes unmistakably clear, not so much as a specific verbal declaration, but as emblematic of his lived ministry as a whole. One place it finds clear verbal expression is in the parable of the Prodigal Son—where it's really the father who is prodigal (Lk 15:11-32).

**9 The greatest commandments: To love God with all your being, and to love your neighbor as yourself.** (Mk 12:29-31 | Mt 22:37-40 | Lk 10:25-28); on a law/teaching/promise written on our hearts (Deut. 30:6; Jer. 31:31-34; Ez. 36: 24-28; 2 Cor. 3:3).

**8 Be clear on your loyalties.** On not serving two masters (Mt 6:24 | Lk 16:13); on paying tribute to Caesar (Mk 12:13-17 | Mt 22:15-22 | Lk 20:20-26).

**7 Live simply, that others might simply live.** On treasures and hearts (Mt 6:21 | Lk 12:34); on children and the kingdom of God (Mk 10:14-15 | Mt 19:14-15 | Lk 18:16-17; also Mk 9:36-37 | Mt 18:1-4 | Lk 9:47-48); on daily bread (Mt 6:11 | Lk 11:3); the parables of Rich Fool (Lk 12:13-21) and Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31); the rich young ruler (Mk 10:17-22 | Mt 19:16-23 | Lk 18:18-24); on holding all material goods in common (Acts 2:42-47).

**6 Sometimes anger is holy. No dens of thieves and no vipers.** Clearing the Temple (Mk 11:15-17 | Mt 21:10-16 | Lk 19:45-46); on woe to Pharisees (Lk 11:42-43; also Mk 12:37-40 | Mt 23:1-36 | Lk 45-47); on offering God's grace ... freely (Mt 10:8).

**5 Do. Or do not. There is no try.** What we do matters more than what we hear or say (Mt 7:24-27 | Lk 6:47-49; also Mt 21:28-32); to say 'I forgive' matters little if we don't do what we can to make others whole (Mk 2:1-12 | Mt 9:1-8 | Lk 5:17-26); knowing by fruit (Mt 7:16-18 | Lk 6:43-46; Mt 12: 33-35); on not waiting for a sign—it's not coming (Mt 12:38-42 | Lk 11:29-32; also Mt 16:4 | Mt 12:38 | Mk 8:12 | Lk 11:29); watch, yes, (Lk 12:35-38) but act now—for the least of these (Mt 25:31-39).

**4 Go ahead, be cheeky.** On turning the cheek (Matt. 5:38-48 | Luke 6:27-35); that the poor hear good news (Mt 11:5 | Lk7:22).

**3 There's a cross with your name on it. But.** Picking up a cross ... losing life ... finding it (Mt 10:38-39 | Lk 14:27-28; also Mk 8:34-37 | Mt 16:24-26 | Lk 9:23-25); and yet the Beatitudes (Mt 5:3-12 | Lk 6:20-23); on trials for disciples (Mk 13:9-13 | Mt 10:17-25 | Lk 21:12-19); on fearless confession (Mt 10:26-32 | Lk 12:2-8)

**2 I am the Way ... no one comes to the Father except by me.** (Jn 14:5-6); early Christians as the Way (Acts 9:2; 19:9,23; 22:4; 24:14,22); on "the least of these" as "the way" to Jesus (Mt 25:31-39)

**1 Be compassionate ... as God is compassionate.** (k 6:35) That is, be willing to suffer with others for their well-being. This is the essence of God's nature. In fact, it's the "perfection" of God. (Mt 5:48).

Lastly, on the overarching call to "be salty" (Mt 5:13).