

Those Bothersome Passages of Scripture

In one of Mark Twain's more memorable statements about religion he said, "Most people are bothered by those passages of Scripture they do not understand, but the passages that bother me are those I do understand." It is a statement well worth recalling when disputes arise regarding "what the Bible says," or "what a Christian should do."

On the one hand, it is quite impossible to derive a single set of teachings that completely defines the Christian religion. Much of scripture cannot be clearly, easily, and universally understood. So much depends on translation and interpretation. It is likewise impossible to translate Christian teaching into a single blueprint for the Christian life. There are various ways to be a Christian – just as there are various ways to be a Jew, a Muslim, a Buddhist, a Hindu, and so on – and we are well advised to remember this.

On the other hand, there are some passages of scripture that are so clear and unequivocal that it leaves me baffled how anyone who claims the label "Christian" could fail to grasp their meaning and implications. "Do justice," "love your neighbor as yourself," "return no one evil for evil," "be kind to one another," "what you do to the least of these (the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, imprisoned), you do to me." I suspect it was scripture passages in which these sorts of teachings appear that most bothered Mark Twain. They raise a bothersome question: Do we, in our lives as individuals and as a society, really follow such teachings or not?

In this column I frequently try to spell out what sorts of practices and policies I believe the members of any society must support, if such teachings as these are taken seriously. Again, there is no single way to live out such teachings, either as individuals or as a society.

However, there are lots of ways to fail to live out such teachings. A society with one of the greatest disparities between rich and poor, without adequate food, shelter, employment, education, or medical care for millions of the poor, with the highest incarceration rates on the planet, and with an inordinate propensity to resort to violence on massive and individual scales, is clearly one whose members are failing to abide by some of the clearest and most basic teachings of scripture. Religious or not, we should all be bothered by this.

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