

AUTHOR OF THE JESUS CREED: LOVING GOD, LOVING OTHERS

SCOT MCKNIGHT

40 DAYS
LIVING
THE
JESUS
CREED



PARACLETE PRESS
BREWSTER, MASSACHUSETTS

40 Days Living the Jesus Creed

2008 First Printing

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ISBN: 978-1-55725-577-8

Published in association with the literary agency of Daniel Literary Group, 1701 Kingsbury Drive, Suite 100, Nashville, TN 37215.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
McKnight, Scot.

40 days living the Jesus creed / Scot McKnight.

p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-1-55725-577-8

1. Christian life--Biblical teaching. 2. Devotional literature. I. Title.
BS680.C47M35 2008

248.4--dc22

2007049368

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Published by Paraclete Press

Brewster, Massachusetts

www.paracletepress.com

Printed in the United States of America

For the Jesus Creed Blog Community

hosted daily at

www.jesuscreed.org

Fine and faithful Christian conversationalists

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INTRODUCTION

Recently my wife, Kris, and I attracted hummingbirds into our backyard to feed on our assortment of feeders and flowers. Throughout a weekend marked by perfect weather, Kris and I sat on our screened porch and read and talked and visited with family and ate our meals together. We learned something that weekend about those little marvels called hummingbirds: they eat constantly. My estimation is they visit our feeders and flowers forty or fifty times a day. Instead of gobbling up an entire bottle of nectar in one sitting, hummers poke their spindly, needle-nosed beaks and extendible tongues to extract nectar from plants and feeders all day long.

Herein lies a parable for us today: many of us live as if we were designed to eat like lions, as if one big meal (Sunday) is enough to sustain us for the week. Not so. Followers of Jesus are more like hummingbirds than lions. We need a steady diet of spiritual nectar if we are to live the kind of life Jesus asks us to live. That life I summarized in a book called *The Jesus Creed*, an expression I use for Jesus' double commandment to love God and to love others.

40 Days Living the Jesus Creed extends what we explored in *The Jesus Creed* into other passages in the Gospels. We then extend the ongoing life of the Jesus Creed into the rest of the New Testament to discover how the Jesus Creed undergirds the Sermon on the Mount, the Love Chapter of the apostle Paul, and the core moral teachings of James (brother of Jesus), Peter, and the apostle John. Because we need a steady diet of Jesus Creed nectar, we have in this book forty short chapters. Exploring how the Jesus Creed lives in other writers of the New Testament offers you and me ongoing reminders, daily feedings as it were, of what is most important—learning to put into practice what it means to love God and to love others.

When I wrote *The Jesus Creed*, I had fond hopes that it would catch on. Yet its success continues to surprise me. Originally I included a concluding chapter to *The Jesus Creed* that revealed how significant the Jesus Creed was to the early Christians, but my editor thought that the book ended where it should have and that a description of the ongoing life of the Jesus Creed could wait until another time. That time is now.

We learn to love God and love others only if we dedicate ourselves to an ongoing commitment to live the Jesus Creed daily. So, my prayer is that by spreading out these two themes over forty days, with a new exploration each day, we will expose ourselves to the potent grace of God's love sufficiently to become more loving.

One more reminder. Neither *40 Days Living the Jesus Creed* nor *The Jesus Creed* can be as effective as they are intended to be if we do not commit ourselves to reciting the Jesus Creed in the morning, in the evening, and anytime during the day that it comes to mind. Here's why: this was the moral creed of Jesus and the earliest Christians. What was an early Christian daily recital fell away as the church moved away from Judaism. So it is our prayer that the daily recital of the Jesus Creed will find its way back into the daily practice of Christians today. Once again, here is the Jesus Creed as found in Mark 12:29–31:

“Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The second is this, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.

PART 1

The Jesus Creed

The Jesus Creed exhorts us to see that the most important commandments in the entire Bible are two: to love God and to love others. All the other commandments and prohibitions—and there are 611 others—derive from one of these two most important commands.

DAY 1

The Most Important Commandments

*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God,
the LORD is one.*

*You shall love the LORD your God
with all your heart,
and with all your soul,
and with all your might.*

—Deuteronomy 6:4–5

We need to remind ourselves daily of what is most important: our primary relationship to God is love. We love God in response to God's great love for us. So important is it to love God, that God tells Israel that they are to remind themselves of their need to love God by developing a sacred rhythm of reciting the following words daily: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I

am commanding you today in your heart.” These words from the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy are called the *Shema* because the first word of these lines, “Hear,” is *shema* in Hebrew.

IMPORTANT WORDS

Notice God’s next words: “Recite [these words] to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

Loving God was *the subject matter* for an Israelite’s whole day. All of life was about loving God with every ounce of one’s being. This was so important that they were to teach their children. So important that they were to recite the *Shema* when they were at home and when they were at work or on vacation. So important that they were to recite them when they got up and when they went to bed, which is the liturgical church’s catalyst for morning prayers and vespers prayers. So important that they were to write them on scraps of papyrus, roll them up, and place them in little leather pouches, and strap the pouches to the forehead and arm. So important that they were to write them on the doorways to their homes. So

important that they were to write them on the portals to their cities and villages.

That's how important it was to remind themselves to love God.

But Jesus said this was not enough.

IMPORTANT AMENDMENT

When Jesus was asked by a budding intellectual, who was no doubt more concerned about a theological debate and an intellectual puzzle than how to walk with God, what was the most important commandment of them all, Jesus recited the *Shema* he had learned from his mother and father as a little boy. Jesus began to answer the man's question in typical fashion. But instead of stopping at Deuteronomy 6, where the intellectual thought Jesus would end, Jesus amended the *Shema* by adding the italicized words of a long-ignored verse in Leviticus (19:18): "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but *you shall love your neighbor as yourself*: I am the LORD." The one God of Israel, the LORD, not only summons his people to love God but also summons them to love their neighbors as themselves. Jesus amended the sacred *Shema* of Israel by adding "love your neighbor as yourself" to what was to be recited daily.

IMPORTANT RHYTHM

About five years ago I bundled up the courage to do what Jesus did. I decided I would say the *Shema* as Jesus did—at least twice a day (morning and evening)—and I would also say it as often as it came to my mind throughout the day. (Sometimes I say it thirty or forty times.) I also decided I would recite the *Shema* in the Jesus form—what I soon began to call the “Jesus Creed.” That is, I’d say what Jesus said in Mark 12:29–31:

“Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The second is this, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.

I have been saying this nonstop for five years, much to the moral danger of my own life! To remind ourselves in a sacred rhythm that our central tasks are to love God and to love others is to keep in mind something that is more challenging than anything in life. It is one thing to do what seems to be right or good and just; it is another thing to love God and to love others—all day long with every ounce of our being.

I challenge you to make this your sacred rhythm.

Facing this day:

Recite the Jesus Creed throughout the day.

Scriptural focus:

“Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The second is this, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.

—Mark 12:29–31

DAY 2

Loving God

*“You shall love the Lord your God
with all your heart,
and with all your soul,
and with all your mind,
and with all your strength.”*

—Mark 12:30

Loving God is a great idea until you try to love God all day long. It is much easier to want to love God or even to say we will love God than it is to love God when yawning cracks of life begin to suck us downward.

To love God means to yearn for, to pray for, and work for what glorifies God and what puts God in God’s place in your life. The Jesus Creed summons us to love God with every ounce of our being—heart, soul, mind, and strength. To love God this way means to offer to God all that we are and to enjoy God’s presence.

David Gill writes of two kinds of love: table-love, which is the love of fellowship and communion, and cross-love,

which is the love seen in sacrifice and devotion. We might add that we find his first kind of love, table-love, through his second kind of love, cross-love. We could say that we find delightful communion with God by giving ourselves to God just as we find delightful communion with a friend or lover by giving ourselves to the other. Jesus calls us to the cross-love of God by giving to God our heart, soul, mind, and strength—and on the other side, we find table-love with God.

GIVE GOD YOUR HEART

The “heart” is the center of one’s *affections*. Think of what you love, what motivates you. Perhaps it is your spouse, your children, your best friend, your job, your hobby, or your travel plans. Give what comes to mind to God by gently offering those affections and persons and ambitions today.

GIVE GOD YOUR SOUL

The “soul” is the center of our *spirituality*. Think of your relationship to God, of what you deem most significant in your spiritual life, of the core of your life. It might begin with prayer or with personal time with God or with your evening time of meditation or with

Bible reading or even with your spiritual vocation or gift. Perhaps it is a daily walk into the mountains or along a body of water during which time you commune with God. Give what comes to mind to God by offering your very soul to God.

GIVE GOD YOUR MIND

The “mind” is the center of our rationality. Think of what you believe, of how you think, of your need for logic, of your need for making sense. Think of how precious your brain is and how it controls all you do. Now give your mind—all you will think about today—to God.

GIVE GOD YOUR STRENGTH

The word “strength” refers to our whole being, our strength and our might and our wealth and all our resources. Coming as this does at the end of a list, we are led to a climactic point: “Love God *with all you’ve got!*” This word “strength” includes heart, soul, and mind, and might be best translated with boldface: “that is, *with everything!*” Think of your body, your ambition, your dreams, your bank account, your insurance policy, and your talents.

To love is to give of ourselves; to love God is to give God all we are and all we have. Give your “strength”—in all you do today—to God.

When I was five years old, my great-aunt Lela Schmacker took this hyperactive kid to a large department store in St. Louis. As we entered the store, she made me an incredible offer: “Scot, you can have anything you want in the whole store. Shop around and just let me know what you would like. I’ll buy it for you.” Don’t imagine that I was like those folks today who get fifteen minutes to fill up their shopping carts. My aunt let me choose one thing, but it was anything I could find in Stix, Baer and Fuller.

Both my mother and father were with me and, to their credit, while they coached me on some ideas, they let me make up my mind. They thought a tent might be a nice idea, and it wouldn’t surprise me that they thought this was a good idea because it would get me out of the house and protect their sanity. I walked around and looked at lots of things, but I was a baseball nut, and so I chose a first baseman’s mitt. Wondering if I might be overextending myself, I also asked my Aunt Lela if I could also have a new baseball. Knowing that she was being let off easy, she said, “Sure.”

I’ve thought about this event a number of times in my life. I imagine that we, like my great-aunt, are inviting

God into the department store of our life and we are offering to God to take whatever he wants. There is a difference: the “one” thing God wants from us is *all* of us. No, in fact, he wants more than all of us: he wants our *love*. If we give God our love, we give God all our “strength.”

Facing this day:
Offer your love today to God.

Scriptural focus:
*“Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;
you shall love the Lord your God with all your
heart, and with all your soul, and with all your
mind, and with all your strength.”*
—Mark 12:29–30

DAY 3

Loving Others

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

—Mark 12:31

Loving others is a great idea until “Mr. or Ms. Other” happens to be a person you don’t like. If we are honest with ourselves, the exhortation to “love your neighbor as yourself” slides quickly into a decision to love someone we like or someone just like us. So, for example, in the world of Jesus, loving God naturally meant doing the Torah. Doing the Torah involved maintaining some firm boundary lines between the holy and the profane, the Israelite and the Gentile, the clean and the unclean. So, the commandment to love your *neighbor* as yourself became for (too) many persons little more than loving one’s holy, Israelite, clean neighbors. The profane, Gentile, and unclean person was erased from the dictionary definition of “neighbor.” Jesus redefined the word *neighbor*.

We might say that Jesus' primary sparring partners, the Pharisees, practiced a "love of Torah" that created boundary lines between neighbors and non-neighbors. Jesus turned that Pharisee expression around and believed in a "Torah of love" that crossed boundaries by redefining the word "neighbor." And to make loving one's neighbor central to life, Jesus picked up the central moral creed of his Jewish world, the *Shema*, and amended it. He added "love your neighbor as yourself" to the *Shema*, which urged Israelites to recite daily these words: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." Jesus' amendment created a moral creed that summoned Israel to love God *and to love their neighbors as themselves*.

A scribe asked Jesus how to gain eternal life. Jesus, ever the good teacher, asked him what the Torah teaches. After proving to Jesus that he understood the Jesus Creed, that the two central commands of God's Torah were to love God and love others, that scribe asked Jesus another question. This time, though, the scribe revealed that he was not yet ready for the revolutionary nature of the Jesus Creed he had so glibly coughed up. He asked Jesus, probably with a little sniff of snobbery, "Who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29). Jesus answered with the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–37). That clever parable revealed that the real question was

not “Who is my neighbor?”—a question that permits one to create boundary lines—but “To whom should I be neighborly?”

The Jesus Creed calls us to neighbor-love—regardless of who the neighbor might be.

BE PREPARED FOR THE UNPREDICTABLE

You cannot determine in advance to whom you will need to act in neighbor-love. Neither can you determine what kind of love you will show. I have joked for years that my education prepared me best to exit my front door on Saturday mornings, to summon my neighbors into my front yard as I stand on the porch, and then to give them a short exposition of a passage from the Greek New Testament. The only problem is that no one would come! We all like to do what we are good at, but my neighbors need something other than what I have to offer in explaining the New Testament.

To discern what prompts neighbor-love, we need to develop eyes that see and ears that hear needs. Sometimes our neighbors need us to mow grass or shovel snow or bring in the mail or look after a dog. They might need us to take them to pick up their car, or they might request a lift to the doctor’s office. What neighbor-love does is never predictable. Often neighbor-love interrupts our

schedule, annoying us more than we care to admit, and calls us to abandon our plans. But our eyes will reveal and our ears will hear the needs of our neighbors if we learn to live the Jesus Creed.

RESPOND TO NEEDS, NOT LABELS

In Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan, the priest and the Levite, who both knew and observed their Torah, saw the man sprawled out on the path and thought he was dead. A corpse was impure, and the Torah taught priests not to defile themselves with corpse impurity unless the dead person was their nearest kin (Leviticus 21:1–4). So they passed him by. In effect, then, the priest and the Levite were doing what the Torah said. But that wasn't enough for Jesus. Someone as desperate as a man abandoned on the road had a need, and needs come before labels and purity laws. This corpse was labeled "unclean," and the priest and the Levite, in Jesus' comic parable, respond to the label instead of the need. The Samaritan, who in stereotyped categories shouldn't have been the one to respond, responded to the need and ignored the label.

We are like the priest and the Levite far more often than we care to admit. We may choose not to stop our journey to respond to persons because of their ethnicity, their economic status, their clothing, their age, or their body

piercings or tattoos. Sometimes we respond negatively to an immigrant's accent or country of origin, or we may fall prey to stereotypes about such persons. Sometimes we walk away from persons because of their disease or their rumored sins. Neighbor-love, as Jesus teaches it and practices it, crosses those boundaries because it responds to needs, not labels.

Two of the biggest challenges of living the Jesus Creed are these: learning to see and hear the needs of the one who happens to be my neighbor and learning to discern when and how to respond. These are the challenges of the Jesus Creed to neighbor-love.

Jesus' word is to us: "Go and do likewise."

Facing this day:

Love the one who happens to be
your neighbor today.

Scriptural focus:

"Which of these three [priest, Levite, Samaritan], do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" [The scribe] said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

—Luke 10:36–37

PART 2

The God of the Jesus Creed

The Jesus Creed does not appear out of thin air. The commands to love God and to love others derive from the love of God: that is, the love of the Father and the Son and the Spirit for one another, and the love of God for us. The origin of the Jesus Creed is found in God.