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Cherry-Picking Jesus Is Not Discipleship

Recently, I read an opinion piece in the local paper written by a Los Angeles Times columnist that left me more confused than informed. The article was sprinkled with fragments of Scripture, yet none seemed meaningfully connected to the author's argument. Unfortunately, this approach is not unusual. It is common on social media, in public commentary, and even on street corners: quoting the Bible without context to support a personal point.

This practice is known as "proof texting." It involves pulling isolated verses from the Bible to justify an argument, without regard for the original context or intent of the passage. It allows a reader to make a verse mean whatever they want it to mean. This not only leads to faulty conclusions, but it can also distort the message of Scripture and, at times, manipulate others. When done carelessly—or knowingly—it undermines both honest discussion and genuine faith.

To be clear, interpreting the teachings of Jesus is not always simple. His words are layered, challenging, and sometimes uncomfortable. It is natural to gravitate toward what resonates while avoiding what calls for change. Yet there is a difference between wrestling with a difficult passage and ignoring it altogether. There is humility in saying, "I may not fully understand this in light of everything else," and that humility is far more honest than forcing a verse to fit a preferred narrative.

For those who identify as followers of Jesus, this matters deeply because discipleship is not selective. A disciple is, by definition, a learner—someone who seeks to understand and live out the full teaching of their teacher. When Scripture is reduced to isolated sound bites, discipleship is reduced to preference rather than transformation.

Consider John 8:11, when Jesus tells a woman caught in adultery, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more." This verse is often used to emphasize compassion and non-judgment, which is certainly present. But it also includes a clear call to change. Jesus offers forgiveness, yet He does not dismiss the seriousness of sin. Remove either part and the meaning is altered.

Similarly, in Luke 6:46, Jesus asks, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" This is a direct challenge to selective belief. Acknowledging Jesus involves more than

agreeing with the parts we like; it calls for a willingness to submit to His teaching as a whole. Otherwise, faith becomes fragmented.

Jesus reinforces this in Matthew 5:17–20, explaining that He came not to abolish the Law but to fulfill it. His teaching deepens and completes what came before, calling for a more comprehensive understanding of both belief and behavior. This is not a message that can be reduced to a few convenient lines without losing its substance.

In John 14:15, He states plainly, “If you love me, keep my commands.” Love, in this context, is expressed through obedience, not selective agreement. Discipleship means allowing His teachings—not personal preference—to shape how we live.

The same principle appears in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19–20), where Jesus instructs His followers to make disciples and teach them to observe everything He commanded. The emphasis is on completeness. A selective approach produces a version of faith that reflects personal opinion more than the message of Jesus.

The consequences of proof texting extend beyond individual belief. Personally, it creates inconsistency and confusion. Collectively, it can produce communities that elevate agreeable ideas while ignoring harder truths. Over time, this leads to a shallow faith—one that lacks both depth and transformative power.

For both believers and skeptics, this is worth noting. Believers are called to approach Scripture with care, humility, and integrity. Skeptics should recognize that not every use of Scripture reflects its true message. In both cases, context matters.

The teachings of Jesus are not a collection of isolated quotes. They form a cohesive message centered on love, truth, accountability, and transformation. Discipleship means engaging that message as a whole, not reshaping it to fit our preferences.

If we are going to reference Scripture—whether in conversation, writing, or public discourse—we owe it to ourselves and others to handle it responsibly. Anything less risks replacing truth with convenience.