

THE JESUS CREED FOR STUDENTS

LOVING GOD, LOVING OTHERS

loving God, loving others

THE JESUS CREED

for
students

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The Jesus Creed for Students: Loving God, Loving Others

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just a few words before we get started

First things first: this book is about following Jesus. Plain and simple. But before you take the adventure of learning what it looks like to follow Jesus, we urge you to pause to think about how to read a book like this.

The subject of this book is about the most serious topic one can imagine. *The Jesus Creed for Students* is about what it means to live a life now before God. It is about the revolutionary vision Jesus has for this world. It is a message that would turn local churches and communities upside down. But there's no secret here: this isn't a book about something that no one has ever heard. It is instead a book that draws our attention to Jesus. Sometimes starting all over again leads us to think we've never been there before.

We would urge you to read this book alone, all by yourself, in your room or in a quiet corner of a library or in a coffee shop. But the message of Jesus isn't to be kept to yourself, so we also want you to take another step: discuss this book with a friend, or more than one friend. Perhaps you want to discuss with your siblings or your parents what you learn and what you discover and what you are pondering. Maybe, too, you will want to sit down with your pastor or your youth leader and discuss what you are discovering.

Out of this process of reading and discussing, the next step is to begin comparing what Jesus teaches with what you are seeing in yourself and in your world and in your church and among your friends and in your family. Maybe you will see things about your school or in your community that call for fresh attention. This is where the message of Jesus begins to

become revolutionary. But it doesn't become revolutionary by getting the world around you to change. It can only become revolutionary if *you* begin to practice what Jesus is calling *you* to do and to be and to live out in fresh, new ways.

What this book will do, we hope, is give you a new imagination, a sudden ability to dream of what you and your friends and your church group and your school and your community—even your country—can become if we learn to live out Jesus' incredible vision for this world.

Note: When the word *I* or *me* or *we* or *our* is used in this book, it refers to one of the three authors or all the three of us at once. Scot McKnight wrote the first draft, but both Syler Thomas and Chris Folmsbee hammered away at ideas, added comments, made suggestions for revisions, and even said, "This won't work." So the book in your hands is the *I* of three different people who are saying the same thing.

Flip to the back of the book if you'd like to read brief bios about each of us.

CHAPTER 1

the Jesus Creed

Imagine Jesus standing in Jerusalem in the temple courts talking to a few people. If you don't have any idea what that ancient massive temple looked like, imagine Jesus sitting on the top steps of the Supreme Court building in Washington, DC, or holding court inside the West Wing of the White House.

Imagine now a religious expert, who has been sent by an unhappy and suspicious-of-Jesus group of religious experts, approaching Jesus in the temple.

Imagine the religious expert asking Jesus a question, a question that is aimed at Jesus for one reason: to trap him.

You need to know two things: the man's question was loaded with political implications, and Jesus' future hinged on his answer. Here's what the religious expert asked:

Of all the commandments, which is the most important?

The religious expert's question put Jesus in a politically vulnerable and religiously charged context. At that time there were serious debates between leading theologians about how to read the Torah (the first five books of Old Testament, often called the "Law"). Should it be simplified down to a few principles or should it be clarified into even more commands? If Jesus went in the reduce-it-to-a-few-principles direction, he'd align himself with the liberals. If he went with the make-more-rules approach, he'd line up with the conservatives. If he did neither, he'd offend both and look lame. What made the situation even more tense was that the religious expert was not really looking for information. He was trying to get Jesus in trouble by getting Jesus to take a position and offend one of the parties.

Jesus' answer baffled the expert. But before we get to his answer, we need to sketch what was going on in Jesus' world when the expert asked Jesus that specific question.

There's an old Jewish rabbinic story that a potential convert approached the leading conservative rabbi named Shammai and rather shamelessly said this: "Make me a convert, on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot." This was a way of saying, "Reduce the Torah to a few principles so I can know if I want to commit or not." In your world, he was saying this: "Give me the *Spark Notes* version!" Shammai was offended by the would-be convert's irreverence and wacked him with a piece of wood and sent him away.

So the inquiring man went to a different school to find the more liberal rabbi, Hillel, and made the same request: "Teach me the whole Torah as I stand on one foot." Hillel, in a way that reduces the whole Torah to one firm handle, said, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah. The rest is just commentary [on that command]. Go and learn this."¹



This convert wannabe asked that question because there were many in the world of Jesus who were *adding commands*, and it was hard for him

to know how to live before God. What do I mean by “adding commands”? There are, to be exact, 613 commandments in the Old Testament, one of which is “Don’t work on the Sabbath!” But that raises this question: “What counts as work?” The “adding” group spelled it out and came up with a list of forty different activities that counted as work. So the one command had become forty commands. The result of the adding approach to the Torah was the multiplication of commands.

So you can see why the question was loaded. If Jesus decided to reduce the Torah as did Hillel, he’d get the pro-Shammai folks irritated. If he reduced it in a way that the pro-Hillel group didn’t like, he’d irritate them. If he refused to play their game, he’d get everybody irritated. So, what did Jesus say?

Before we get there, what would you say if someone came to you and in a Snow-White-like question asked, “What is the fairest commandment of them all?” What Jesus said teaches everyone who wants to be his follower exactly how to orient every moment of every day:

What’s the “fairest”
commandment of them all?

Part A

Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment.”

Part B

*“And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’
All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”*

Matthew 22:37–40

The whole Torah, not just part of it but the whole thing from Genesis to Malachi,^{1*} will be done if every day we love God with every molecule and globule (that's my translation) and love others as we love ourselves. Go ahead, Jesus is saying, read the whole Old Testament, and everything God tells you is either a love-God or a love-others-as-yourself command. (I suggest you sometime sit down with Exodus chapters 19 through 24, for instance, and in the margins mark "G" for love God commands or "O" for love-others-as-yourself commands. I've done this, and it works.)

How to keep this in mind

I call this love-God and love-others statement of Jesus the *Jesus Creed*. The Jesus Creed is the very core of what Jesus wanted his disciples to practice. At the time of Jesus, every faithful Jew began and ended his or her day by reciting what is called the *Shema*,^{2#} and the *Shema* is part A above. It can be found in Deuteronomy chapter 6, verses 4 and 5 (and one can extend it to verse 9). Every time observant Jews walked out the door of their home or entered the door of their home, they said it again. Not only that, but if they were walking on the path with their children, they were to say the *Shema* again to teach their children how to live.

So, when Jesus begins his "what's the fairest of them all?" answer, he recites something he's been reciting since he learned to speak. He would have learned to recite the *Shema* from his earthly father, Joseph, and his mother, Mary.

But Jesus goes beyond this: he *adds* to the sacred *Shema* another command, the love-others command. He picked this from Leviticus, what my students sometimes call the "Bible's weird book" because of its in-our-world strange purity codes. Anyway, by adding from Leviticus

1. The Bible at the time of Jesus was organized differently from yours. The Torah was followed by the Prophets (from Joshua to Malachi) and then the Writings (Job and Psalms and Proverbs, but the Writings ended with 1–2 Chronicles).

2. Please do not pronounce the Hebrew word *Shema* like this: "Sheee-mah." Say it like this: "Sh'ma," that is, with a very quick and almost silent "e."

the love-others command to the love-God command, Jesus gave to his followers a brand new form of the *Shema*. Instead of calling this the Jesus *Shema*, I call it the Jesus Creed. It is Jesus' version of the *Shema*.

Everything after this page will be shaped by the Jesus Creed. If Jesus thought the whole of God's will for us is to love God and to love others, then everything he calls us to be and to do is related to the Jesus Creed.

Now my suggestion

I suggest you try this for one month.

- When you get up, say the Jesus Creed (memorize the words in italics above or look at the end of this book where it is found along with the Lord's Prayer).
- When you go to bed, say it again.
- When you leave your house, say it again. When you enter your house, say it one more time.
- Then make this commitment to yourself (for one month): any other time it comes to mind, say it again.



When you get up, say the Jesus Creed.

When you go to bed, say it again.

When you leave your house, say it again.

When you enter your house, say it one more time.



Why do these things? Just watch what happens to you when you begin to live the Jesus Creed. You will see how loving God and loving others begins to seep into everything you say, you do, and you think. You will also find

yourself living the Jesus Creed. This is precisely why God told the Israelites to repeat the *Shema* all the time: repetition has a way of working itself into the soul and heart.

One of my students told me this story. She was nannying for a wealthy family and she didn't particularly like the kids. But it was good money and she was trying her best to like the kids (and she admitted they could be difficult). One day, on her way to the home, she came to an intersection and as she waited for another car, the Jesus Creed came into her mind. So she said it. She said it calmed her and she said this: "I was SO, SO different for a few hours and then I got cranky." The next day, she told me, she did the same thing with the same result. But she wasn't happy that she got so cranky with the kids after a couple hours. So, she said when she noticed her own irritation the next day, she stopped and said the Jesus Creed calmly one more time. She then said this to me: "Saying the Jesus Creed made SO much difference. So I started saying it more often, and you know what, Scot? I got to where I really began to love those kids. Now it's fall and I'm back in classes and I miss them."



Recite the Jesus Creed

CHAPTER 2

happiness is a GPS

(global positional system)



Recite the Jesus Creed

Do you want to be happy? Do you want to feel good about yourself? Do you want to be personally satisfied and contented and tranquil and enjoy life?

Recently I did an informal survey of my Facebook “Friends,” wandering through the “Info” page one by one for a long, long time. I wanted to know what my friends wanted out of life. I didn’t write them and ask them, but just trusted their words on their Info page would give me some clues. What do you think was the number-one idea that rose to the top of what they wanted from life? To enjoy life or to be personally happy.

No question about it.

Happiness is what people want out of life.

Some of my friends equate happiness with self-discovery; others think they’ll find happiness by discovering love; yet others believe they’ll be happy if they can challenge injustices and overcome obstacles and triumph and succeed; others want to get a good job and make good money and find a good husband or wife and have good kids in a good community; and others seem to contend that happiness comes from traveling around the world. I’m guessing that my friends are not too different from yours; every one of us is unique, but we all agree on happiness.



What is happiness?



As I read those Info pages on Facebook, though, something dawned on me. Nearly every one of my Friends connected happiness with *getting something they wanted*—whether what they wanted was love, friends, good jobs, experiences, travel, or even world peace.

But what if you don't get what you want? When I was in junior high and high school, what I wanted was a successful athletic career—and it didn't matter to me whether I played in the NBA or the NFL or won a medal in track and field at the Olympics. I just wanted to rise to the top. But then one day during basketball practice in my senior year in high school something began to pop in my knee, and two weeks later I was hobbling on crutches and my athletic career was all but over. This was before the days of arthroscopy, so they cut my knee open, severing muscles and nerves and . . . well . . . the winding scar ended *what I wanted*. I had been living for a dream, and that dream, so I believed, would bring me happiness.

The dream ended. If happiness can be found only in getting what we most dream for, then happiness is almost impossible, because very few people get what they most want out of life.

Happiness eludes its devotees

We are a culture obsessed with happiness, and yet it seems to elude us. More people are depressed than perhaps at any other time in history. One recent study suggests that fifteen percent of the population of most developed countries suffers from severe depression. What do we make of this? A study from the late 1980s found that with the baby boom generation in the U.S. (those born between 1946 and 1964), depression increased ten-fold, compared with the previous generations.² The cause? The researcher

concluded that these baby boomers abandoned the example of previous generations of living for something greater than themselves and instead sought to live only for their own happiness. How ironic that the primary goal of these people's lives was the very thing that eluded them. So how do we apply this study to our purposes?

Don't seek happiness. Seek God. Seek to live according to the Jesus Creed, loving God and others, and what you'll find is that you get the happiness thrown in. In Jesus' words (Matthew 6:33): Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well. Happiness is not something we seek; happiness comes to those who seek what is right and good and loving.

Jesus had a GPS

Like giving answers to a time-shortened pop quiz, Jesus must have been asked, "Who do you think is happy?" and he answered by listing the sort of people who are happy. We call his answers the Beatitudes.

His answers shocked his audience, and they were designed to shock them. We see the word *blessed* over and over in the Beatitudes, and I think the quest for happiness in our culture is actually the quest to be blessed.

So, who's happy according to Jesus?

The poor in spirit.

Those who are mourning someone's death.

The meek and humble.

Those whose souls ache to do what is right.

Those who see others in need and respond in mercy.

Those whose inner hearts are pure.

And those who get between fighters to bring the balm of peace.

That's seven surprises, but the next two are even more surprising:

Those who are physically persecuted and socially excluded.

And those who are verbally insulted and unjustly accused.



Would Jesus' list of "blessed" people be
your list?



It's much easier to see why peacemakers are blessed by Jesus than it is to see how someone can be called "blessed!" for being opposed, excluded, or accused because they follow Jesus—and some of his closest followers were crucified and martyred for following Jesus. Why call someone blessed who suffered martyrdom? It sure looks like Jesus' idea of blessed contrasts with our view of happiness. What could Jesus mean by this word *blessed*?

So I sat down with my Bible open and read Matthew 5:1–16 closely, pondering over words and sentences and connections. What jumped out at me is that these people were blessed *because they don't fit the stereotype of what makes a person happy*. Reading the Bible closely means considering all the angles, so I turned over to the Gospel of Luke because he records a slightly different version of Jesus' "Nine Blessed People." There Jesus lists only Four Blessed People:

The poor

The hungry

The weeping

And the persecuted.

But I noticed something else: Jesus goes on to *denounce another group of people*. Who does he denounce?

The rich

The eat-everything-you-can-stuff-into-your-maw crowd

The laughing

And the popular.

So I pondered some more. What is the difference, or what are the differences, between the “blessed” and the “not blessed” groups? What we find guides us right to the heart of how people can be flourishingly happy and not get what they want. It starts with which word is best.



How are you doing on reciting the
Jesus Creed daily?



The word *blessed* is far richer, far deeper, and far more transcendent than the term *happy*. That word *happy*, unfortunately, makes me think of emoticons and people with big smiles and the pumped and the thrilled. I teach at North Park University. As I write this, we are grieving at North Park. Two of our students died within one week of one another. College students aren’t supposed to die. Others in our community also died. One group in Jesus’ list was the grieving. Jesus blessed the grieving, but he didn’t mean to say, “So, someone died. Be happy!”

The president at North Park, David Parkyn, wrote all of us a note, and here are some of his words:

In years to come when we tell the story of this year at North Park death will be an important part of our story. We will tell of Jessica and Kat, two undergraduates at North Park who died within a week of each other in the spring semester. We will tell of Vernard, a seminary student, Betty, a campus administrator, and Wendy, a faculty member, who each died during the fall semester.

But today we are grieving. Our story this year doesn't ring true. We struggle to make sense of it. We have lost five beloved members of our campus community. These have been our friends and colleagues, roommates and lab partners, companions in the joy of life at North Park. We grieve this loss; we wonder why God allows such grief and loss, pain and tears in our lives individually and in our collective community life.

Stories that matter—like the story of this year at North Park—often complicate life. The story isn't being written as we expect or want. Yet in the unexpected we may discover the truth expressed in an old Spanish saying: “*Dios escribe derecho con líneas torcidas.*”—God writes straight with crooked lines.—Death is part of this year's story at North Park, a story written by God with crooked lines.

But Jesus blessed the grieving (like our whole campus). Jesus blessed those who are living in the crooked lines. Why?

Because to be blessed is not getting something we want, but being the kind of person God wants us to be. Being blessed is being a person who loves God and loves others, as the Jesus Creed teaches. Sensitive, caring, loving people grieve when someone dies, and they work for peace when fights break out, and they ache to do what is right in each circumstance in life. Jesus blesses people for *being approved and loved and affirmed by God*. So, being happy according to Jesus is not at all about getting what you want or what I want. Instead, being happy is *being the person God wants you to be*. Correct that: being the person God wants you to be makes

you *blessed*.

Our point: It is better to be blessed than happy. Blessed carries us through bad days; happy is only on the good days. Blessed is about loving God and loving others; happy is about loving myself (and whatever makes me happy).



Being blessed is not getting something we
want, but being the kind of person God
wants us to be.



This deep and inner conviction—happiness is something about what God wants and not what we want—gave Jesus a GPS to guide his followers. The poor and the persecuted, the grieving and the peacemaking, and the humble and the poor are given a GPS to navigate life. When things don't go our way, when we don't get what we want, when life's path takes a sharp curve and throws us down into the valley, when the line from where you are to where you want to go gets crooked, happiness—correct that—being blessed guides us through the night and into the light. Jesus' words are the GPS for his followers. They point the way when life doesn't turn out the way we hoped. Instead of equating our happiness with getting what we want, we can become happy by becoming and being the people God wants.

That's the difference between happy and blessed.

One more thing to day: the word *blessed* describes the person whose central principles are “love God” and “love others.” The word *happy* describes the person whose central principle is “love myself.”



Recite the Jesus Creed

