

Dear members and friends of St. John,

Most of us remember the **"What Would Jesus Do" movement** that swept across Evangelical Christianity in the 1990's. Most don't know its origin. Well, it all began when a youth group leader in Holland, Michigan, named Janie Tinklenberg, began a grassroots movement to help the teenagers in her group remember the phrase. It spread nationwide in the 1990s among Christian youth, who wore bracelets bearing the initials W.W. J. D.

There were even Lutheran church leaders who promoted these bracelets. The idea was to use the bracelet as **a reminder when making moral choices**. On the outset, it may not seem like such a bad idea. It reminds me of the Pharisees of Jesus' day who wore phylacteries. What's a phylactery? They were small, black leather cubes containing a piece of parchment inscribed with the following Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Deuteronomy 11:13-21, and Exodus 13:1-16. One is attached with straps to the left arm and the other to the forehead. These were worn as a reminder to the wearer (and to the people who saw it worn by them) of the Law of God. If you don't remember these verses, let me remind you of Deuteronomy 6:

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. ⁷You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. ⁸You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." (vv. 4-9).

This is a little longer than "What would Jesus do," but **both are reminders of the Law of God**. Jesus, of course, lived a perfect life, keeping all of God's Law. Therefore, imitating Jesus' words and actions would, in theory, make a person "perfect." The problem is in the details. First, the New Testament does not even come close to providing us with a complete record of Jesus' moral life and decision making (see John 21:25). Many choices that people are confronted with in the 21st Century are not covered in the historical record. And so, this W. W. J. D. reminder would lead to some head-scratching and guess-work. But second, and more importantly, **the New Testament was never meant to be a guide to moral living**.

Sure, a moral lifestyle is good. Keeping the Law of God is pleasing to God and of great benefit to us and our neighbor. But Jesus had to come to earth because of our inability to keep the moral law. Furthermore, any life that makes **keeping the Law of God of paramount importance** is a life that is **destined for failure**. Listen to Jesus' own words, spoken to the Scribes and Pharisees (and to you and me):

"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³²and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." ³³They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free?'" ³⁴Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. ³⁶So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:31-36).

Jesus' word (v. 31, above) includes the law and the good news of His death and resurrection for the forgiveness of all sin. The truth is that Jesus had to take-on and carry-out the moral law, in our stead. **We are incapable to carrying out the demands of the law**. The most important aspect of **abiding in Jesus** is receiving the Gospel to heart and mind: **Jesus lived a perfect life, died on the cross, and rose again for the forgiveness of my sins**. Only with **faith in Jesus' atoning**

work, can we accomplish good things. With Jesus working in us, we will find that our lifestyle has indeed become more "moral," as we make better decisions. But most important, we are freed from the demands of the Law and therefore are able to **love our neighbor with a heart that is free to love**. The Law by itself can't change the heart and mind. Only the Gospel has the power to change us. And that change gives us the power to love our neighbor sacrificially.

Notice the words of Deut. 6:5: *You shall **love** the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.* **The Law was never meant to complete us – to make us whole in Christ.** No, it was to drive us to the point of having to place our trust in the Messiah, for we are not capable of saving ourselves. With faith in Jesus, we are given the power to **love, as Christ has loved us.**

So, carrying around the Law (phylacteries or W. W. J. D. bracelets) is **not** the solution to **a life pleasing to God**. No, **the Gospel of Jesus holds the key to a life of repentance and faith.** This allows us to love. And love is the fulfillment of God's Law!

Years ago, I knew of a family that left the Lutheran church, because they read Deut. 6, and decided they could teach their children the moral law just as well as the church. This poor family was lost in a W. W. J. D. world. The damage that they could inflict on trying to use the law to change their children's hearts and minds is immeasurable. There are many churches in America today who continue down this dead-end path of using the Law as a hammer to shape their young people. If they would only follow Jesus' own words. If they would only learn to abide in Him. **Lutheran Sunday Schools place the Gospel of Jesus as paramount to our children's growth and spiritual health. And for good reason. The Gospel is the key!**

Finally, a few words about teaching our children or grandchildren what is morally acceptable and good. When I was growing up, TV shows like *Leave it to Beaver*, and *My Three Sons*, gave us a visual reference of what this lifestyle looked like. Furthermore, we had our neighborhoods with family and friends that helped us to grow up in a world that was largely "moral" and "ethical." Teachers in school enforced morals. In short, **we were immersed in a moral lifestyle from an early age.** Our society today has largely abandoned the enforcement of moral and ethical behavior in our school-age children. TV and movies, directed toward adults, often depict lifestyles that are amoral and destructive, while holding up this behavior as normal or even acceptable (the gay and lesbian lifestyle, for instance). This places even more importance on what happens within the family unit and in making sure they attend Sunday School. We must teach our children and grandchildren morals, but never without providing them with **the proper foundation to build on: the Gospel of Jesus Christ.** When teaching morals, always point to *your* difficulty in doing this perfectly. Point them to the necessity of Jesus and His work on the cross for us. And then, return back to the moral point that you are reinforcing with them. It's important for them to understand that *you* can't keep the law perfectly, even though *you know* that this is pleasing to God, and this is what *you* would like to do. And, make sure you **discipline your children** when they fail to carry out what you've taught and expect of them. Discipline is done out of love for them, so they can understand that there are real consequences to amoral words and actions. Discipline is critical to their development as God's children.

A movement developed in some Lutheran circles to combat W. W. J. D. bracelets (and other gadgets). It was called, **"What Did Jesus Do."** Pointing our youth to His work on the cross is far more important than pointing them to the Law. It never caught on, of course, because our society is greatly influenced by the Evangelical movement (and that we like to believe that we have the ability to change

ourselves through the law). We know the Truth. And **the Truth has set us free!** May God continue to change our hearts and minds, so that **our love may bring glory to Him.** What did Jesus do? Everything for our salvation. Amen.

Pastor Travis