

Impractical advice

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If you check out Bibles online or in a bookstore, you are likely to run across something called a *Life Application Study Bible*. As the name suggests, this study Bible is less about traditional Bible study and more about how to apply the Bible's teaching in everyday life. I saw a plug for this Bible that touted it for providing excellent "practical application."

In a similar manner, pastors are often encouraged to make their sermons "more practical," usually meaning something akin to what the *Life Application Study Bible* advertises. How am I to apply this teaching in my daily living?

This certainly seems a noble, sincere desire to live faithfully, but the project is sometimes made difficult by the very impractical advice that Jesus offers. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you... love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return." Really? This is practical advice?

I suppose there is practicality in that such behavior has a reward. "Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked." Of course just what this reward is remains unspoken. Perhaps it is being declared "children of the Most High," to become like God in being "kind to the ungrateful and the wicked."

If you've ever been involved in a mission or ministry that tries to help people, you've likely encountered some people who are very grateful for such help. But no doubt you've also encountered those who have no gratitude, who instead are bitter and insulting, demanding to know why the help isn't more.

I'll admit that such times can test my desire to help. If people don't appreciate it, why offer it? But then there is that terribly impractical advice from Jesus. "Do good... expecting nothing in return," not even gratitude. After all, God is "kind to the ungrateful and the wicked." You sure that's a good idea, God? It's certainly not very practical.

We humans like to measure things on practical terms, and on some level, we express most everything along these lines. Falling in love may not be immediately thought of in practical terms, but the relationships that emerge from it are usually contractual on some level. I'll stay with you, keep loving you, stay married to you as long as it makes me happy, makes me feel good, provide for me, etc. Even seemingly altruistic things like environmentalism have a practical side. We're preserving the planet for our children. And it's a lot easier to engage people in saving tigers or pandas than it is snail darters. Most of us will never receive any joy or experience any awe from observing the latter.

I'm not entirely sure where I'm going with this train of thought, but faith, at some level, is surely about taking a certain path or living a certain way without being able to see obvious, practical advantages to such actions. I suppose a reward of being called "children of the Most High," of discovering our own godliness, has a kind of practical appeal. But I wonder if it can really be experienced through practical, contractual means. It seems to me that is only discovered or experienced in the act of total surrender to God, an act that doesn't really seek any reward.

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