

Truths hidden in plain sight

Cally Hammond lists ten sayings she wishes were in the Bible.

ALMOST all the things that I find unappealing in human nature and behaviour are already condemned in scripture – judgmentalism, dishonesty, malice, and the like. So are the things that I both condemn and confess, such as acquisitiveness, gluttony, and gossip. But there are still gaps, where I wish that our forebears had realised that we would need the truth spelled out.

So, I made my own selection of ten sayings that have lodged themselves in my mind as containing what Justin Martyr might have called the “generative Word” – teachings from outside a Christian context which, none the less, contain seeds of Christian truth.

1. **“God (Allah) loves wondrous variety”** This comes from the film *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*. It is spoken by a Muslim character and challenges the exclusivist mindset of some Christians. We should not fear persons of other faiths serving God in their own way; we should rejoice that we are all individuals and not confuse unity with uniformity.
2. **“My truth”** This is attributed to Oprah Winfrey, among others. It sits awkwardly beside the God of truth, whose Son is Truth. But it does not mean that whatever we feel is either right or accurate; rather, it highlights that we see things from our own perspective, and warns against behaving as if “my truth” and “the truth” were one and the same. “My truth” and “your truth” are reminders of how small our range of vision really is. Readiness to admit that our views may be ill founded and our judgements unfair is a necessity in Christian living.
3. **“With great power comes great responsibility”** The Committee of Public Safety of 18th-century France passed this down to Spider-Man. Despite the whiff of cheesy sententiousness, it sets the moral bar high at a time when such a challenge is needed. Yet we need reminding that “great responsibility” is not necessarily about Offices of State. What power, what responsibility, is greater than that of a parent? But anyone can do it, with no qualifications. Pet ownership is a power of life and death. As the status of any office decreases, the responsibilities become harder, for they will not attract sponsorship, celebrity endorsement, or a safety net. Ordination confers power to mediate divine grace and forgiveness, and that is exercised not just by bishops with staff, offices, and legal advice, but by harassed priests in multi-parish benefices permanently short of help and resources.
4. **“Biology is not destiny”** In 1912, the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud wrote that women’s anatomy was their destiny. Now that contraception is freely available to all who want it, women do not have to be permanently pregnant or nursing from 16 to 40-plus years of age. But “biology is not destiny” is a saying for all Christians, encapsulating the teaching of St Paul. He taught that “the flesh” and “the spirit” pull humankind in opposite directions; St Augustine took this up in terms of humanity been driven by desires or “appetites”, which - if uncontrolled - could disintegrate the soil’s integrity. Women and men alike can choose to follow their appetites or to strive for “the more excellent way”. Biology can explain our desires and behaviour but not excuse them.
5. **“The person who sings prays twice”** If only Augustine really had said this. But, if he did, I can’t find it. It looks to me like a perception so acute that it demands to be authenticated though attribution to a great authority – like Paul, with the letter to the Hebrews. When we sing, we are not praying with our whole selves: not just mind or

mouth, but body and soul together in heavenly harmony. The pandemic has given this insight an epiphanic force.

6. **“There are tears of things, and the stuff of mortality touches the mind”** Virgil immerses us in the pathos of the human condition. *Lacrimae rerum* – “the tears of things” – evoke the shadow-world of suffering and struggle; of melancholy, depression and accidie. The “stuff of mortality” is a way of saying that we are all possessed by death, and that faith can sometimes simply be putting one foot in front of another, in hopeless hope. This cuts against upbeat self-help, self-care, self-love; against relentless optimism and compulsory cheerfulness. Enduring is inseparable from the business of being alive, and we had better learn to make room for it.
7. **“A very narrow income has a tendency to contract the mind and sour the temper”** From Jane Austen’s *Emma*. Sentimentality about poverty is unhelpful when dispensed from haves to have-nots. George Orwell put it (I paraphrase) in terms of posh vegetarians despising the chips and ciggies of the poor. It reminds me of Sue Townsend’s *The Queen and I*, when Her Majesty, ousted from her throne and living in a council house, remembering that she ought to boil ham bones for a nourishing broth, makes herself a jam sandwich instead. For every Miss Bates, relentlessly cheerful despite her dependence on capricious charity, there are many people in angry despair at the financial prison that they are in. Money can’t buy happiness, but it can insulate us from certain deprivations.
8. **“I am wiser than this man; for neither of us knows anything, but he thinks he has knowledge when he does not, whereas I, who do not have knowledge, do not think that I have it”** Socrates, in Plato, *Apology* 21d. It is notoriously difficult to pin down what Socrates thought and taught. But he regards it as advantageous, to one who seeks wisdom, to start from the assumption that they know nothing. Sometimes scripture comes close to this, but not quite in terms of the distinction between knowledge and opinion, which is so important to Plato’s mind. Faith is a matter of belief, not knowledge, and it would be a step forward for Christianity to understand this approach rather than protest outward certainty while suppressing the doubts and questions that could enable a more confident faith.
9. **“We gaze at the same stars; we share the same sky; the same universe engages us. Does it matter by what understanding each of us seeks the truth? There cannot be just one route for penetrating so great a mystery”** Symmachus’s argument that Roman polytheism and Christianity should be able to coexist was a failure. But his idea is a great leap forward in the history of religion.
10. **“We have our hope set on the living God, who is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe”** If the top ten things I wish were in the Bible have a common thread running through them, that thread is tolerance. Tolerance is not a Bible virtue, nor a Christian virtue. The word does not even appear in the Bible, except as a negative (“put up with”). But in 1 Timothy 4.10, we have a clear teaching that salvation is something that God effects for everyone, giving a particular place to believers, but embracing all of humankind. Why is this verse not better known? I have never heard it preached. Yes, there are verses that say different; but the universalist view has its proper place in our faith, as an insight that we can claim and proclaim with integrity.

AND if, after reading this, you are encouraged to work out your own wish list of ten sayings, you, too, may find that the ones that matter most were in scripture all along.

The Revd Dr Cally Hammond is the Dean of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge.
(from the Church Times)