

Subject: Dolly Parton and the Two Commandments
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Dolly Parton and the Two Commandments

ERICK-WOODS ERICKSON
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Dolly Parton is one of the last Americans truly loved by people across the ever increasingly divided tribal American landscape.

I do not know what her spiritual condition was when she died. She grew up in the church, has openly talked about her spiritual drift, what became a communal spiritualism, and, towards the end of her life, waking up at 4 am every day, getting on her knees, and having heart-to-hearts with Jesus.

What her actual views were, I do not know.

What I know is that when our Lord was asked what the greatest of the commandments was, Jesus summed up the ten commandments thusly:

“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” Mark 12:29-31 (ESV)

I cannot speak to Dolly Parton and the first of these. That is between her and God. We can all speak to the second commandment.

Dolly Parton, for years, has donated band uniforms to poor, majority-black schools across the South with no public credit or recognition. She has provided books for children because her father was illiterate. She rebuilt homes and she rebuilt churches. She built and upgraded hospitals in poor communities. She provided jobs and opportunities for the poor.

She did not demand that the government do it. She used her wealth to do it.

Dolly Parton did not care if you were gay or trans or straight or white or black or Republican or Democrat. She loved her neighbor as herself.

Today, partisans of the Left insist one cannot love their neighbor without affirming

their sins. Partisans of the Right insist one cannot love their neighbor without denouncing their sins. A growing number of people on both sides of the political spectrum believe they cannot love their neighbors who are different, politically or otherwise. Some relish hating their neighbors and find ways to justify it.

A growing number of Christians in America think basic empathy, i.e., understanding another person's lot in life, is a bridge too far. Others insist that one cannot embrace an understanding of loving one's neighbor without compromising principled beliefs.

A growing number of online partisans in the church believe if one is too friendly or nice to those outside the church, that's a sign of one's compromise of belief and infidelity to scripture.

All I know is if we had more people willing to love their neighbors like Dolly Parton did, not waiting on the government to act or insisting others affirm their values first, we'd be a lot better off.

Loving your neighbor comes with no carve outs, exceptions, provisos, caveats, footnotes, or endnotes. It is not always easy. Sometimes the neighbor refuses your kindness unless you affirm their sins, which is, in itself, not loving the person. Sometimes, despite how hard you try, you will be rejected.

But, if nothing else, the affection we see being poured out for Dolly Parton as the sun rises this morning is a reminder that "The second [commandment] is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" She loved her neighbors and did not need or want the praise of others. It was not performance, but commitment to the second of the two great commandments.

Ten years ago, NPR invited Dolly Parton to an interview in Washington, D.C. They put her up in the Ritz Carlton. Her management called NPR and told them that Dolly was not comfortable in a Ritz. She'd prefer a Courtyard by Marriott. When Hurricane Helene blew homes off the sides of mountains in Appalachia, Dolly Parton did not wait for FEMA. She wrote checks and provided support. Dolly Parton was rich before she was wealthy. She died not a billionaire, only because of how much she gave to others.

In a world of increasing anger, despair, and hatred of our neighbors, we could all stand to be more like Dolly Parton. That does not mean we should abandon

convictions, faith, or values, or cross from empathy to suicidal empathy.

But it does mean remembering that loving your neighbor has no exceptions and it is a personal, not a corporate, obligation.

Dolly Rebecca Parton Dean, born January 19, 1946, has gone to stand before the Lord our God, who raised her from the dust of the earth and stitched her together in her mother's womb and knew her before time itself began. Requiescat in pace.



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Dolly Parton and Loretta Swit performing "If We Never Meet Again This Side of Heaven" on The Dolly Parton Show (1987)



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