

God said It, I Believe It, That Settles It?

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Deuteronomy 23:12-14

We continue our sermon series on half-truths using resources from Church of the Resurrection UMC. We've been considering things that well-meaning Christians often say, things they believe, that may not be entirely true. They sound right and often can be supported by some scripture. But when you dig a little deeper you realize life is a bit more complicated than that or maybe faith or theology is. They just don't make sense. Sometimes they are even hurtful although we are meaning them to be helpful. We find that under careful examination they are found to be, at best, half-truths.

And today we turn to a saying that you might have seen on a billboard, let's say it together: GOD SAID IT, I BELIEVE IT, THAT SETTLES IT.

Some have gone a step farther, like this bumper sticker: GOD SAID IT, THAT SETTLES IT, WHETHER I BELIEVE IT OR NOT. Of course by "God said it," Christians are usually referring to the Bible—so what we really mean is "The Bible said it, I believe it, that settles it."

That sounds so right. Of course if God said something to me I would believe it and that would settle it. Yet there are several reasons why we might want to pull this statement from our theological vocabulary....

I'm guessing you've never heard our scripture passage today preached on in a sermon. It did show up, though, in sermons in the late 1800's when indoor toilets began to come on the scene. Until that time churches had outhouses. When it became possible to install indoor toilets in churches, there was a debate over whether it was appropriate to have them in the Lord's house. Our scripture passage today, Deuteronomy 23:12-14, was the verse people turned to. Here we read the Bible's teaching regarding relieving oneself:

"You shall have a designated area outside the camp to which you shall go. With your utensils you shall have a trowel; when you relieve yourself outside, you shall dig a hole with it and then cover up your excrement.

Because the LORD your God travels along with your camp, to save you and to hand over your enemies to you, therefore your camp must be holy, so that he may not see anything indecent among you and turn away from you."

The Israelites were to go to the bathroom outside the camp because the LORD was with them. Since God was in their midst they were to be holy, and that meant going to the bathroom outside the encampment so that God would not see anything indecent among them, turn away from them and thereby remove his blessing from them. It was argued, that based upon this text, God would find it unholy and indecent for people to go to the bathroom inside his house!

But you won't find a church built in the last 75 years that does not have indoor toilets. In fact, as Church of the Resurrection was developing the plans for their new sanctuary the number one question they were asked, was "How many toilets will there be?" ...

It goes beyond toilets. We find that the Bible says not to eat shrimp, or bacon, or baby back ribs. We're not to wear clothing of mixed fibers—no blended fabrics. Men are not to trim the edges of their beards. We're not to touch the skin of a pig – what does that mean to the NFL?

But there are other ways this plays itself out. Some passages in the Bible are more drastic than others. When we say “God said it” or “the Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it”. I don't think many of us actually read the Bible that way, or apply it that way or even want to. Exodus 21:15 says, if a child ever curses his father or mother or if they are persistently rebellious they are to be put to death. According to Exodus 35:2 if someone works on the Sabbath—Saturday—they are to be put to death. Deuteronomy 22:21 says if a woman is not a virgin when she marries, but has been intimate with someone aside from her new husband, the men of her town are to stone her to death.

God says it, I believe it, that settles it!

This approach to the Bible was used frequently in the 1840's, 50's and 60's by many southern preachers who argued that slavery was part of God's social order. There are over 200 verses in the Bible that affirm slavery. The Bible doesn't say slavery is a great idea. God liberated the Israelites from slavery, but no sooner than they are free in the area of Mt Sinai, God gives them rules regulating their slaves. It was just assumed that these freed slaves would eventually have slaves of their own. So we tend to call that the “good” kind of slavery, but when you read the texts it doesn't sound like the “good” kind of slavery. The text says, if an owner beat his slaves with a rod and beats them harshly as long as they didn't die within 2 days then there was no punishment “for the slave is the property of the master”. If there's any danger of someone dying from being beaten by a rod – that doesn't sound like the “nice” kind of slavery to me.

There is a passage from the Gospel of Luke – words of Jesus that were taken out of context and said to slaves. If you saw the movie 12 Years a Slave you would have seen a particularly harsh master quote this while holding his Bible:

“That slave who knew what his master wanted, but did not prepare himself or do what was wanted, will receive a severe beating.” Luke 12:47.

So these words, rooted and grounded in scripture were used to justify the peculiar institution of slavery and beating the heck out of slaves. It’s right there in the Bible. God says it, I believe it, that settles it!

There are ways that phrase applies that is not as harsh as that. I’ve heard of weddings where the bride and groom did not exchange rings, but Bibles instead. They didn’t exchange rings because Paul writes in 1 Timothy 2:9:

“Women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes.” Or this verse from Peter 3:3:

“So do not adorn yourself outwardly by braiding your hair, and by wearing gold ornaments or fine clothing.” So no gold.

So just to let you know the ushers will be coming forward in a few moments and we’ll be inviting you to put all your gold jewelry, your diamonds, and fancy watches into the offering plates.

Perhaps more uncomfortable for some are Paul’s words from 1 Timothy 2:11-12:

“Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.”

It's obvious to me when I read these words that Paul was never married or else he couldn't have written them I don't think.

But we have to remember that in Paul's day women had no rights or virtually no rights, they generally didn't own property, and virtually no means of income. And the gospel was a scandal because it made them feel a greater equality. Paul himself said "in Christ there is neither male nor female." And there were women leaders in the church and you can find ½ a dozen listed at the end of the book of Romans and Jesus was ministering with women. So you find a sense of equality happening that they weren't finding in the Roman Empire. So Paul comes back and Paul I think is a little nervous about what's happening. We have to remember that even here in America a hundred years ago, our great grandmothers didn't have the right to vote. So we can't hold Paul to the standards of the 21st century back in the 1st century.

From where to go to the bathroom, to what to eat, to the death penalty for ornery kids, to slavery, to the jewelry and clothing we can wear and what women can say in the church, we recognize that "God said it, I believe it, that settles it" is overly simplistic and may not really capture how we as Christians read and interpret and really live and apply scripture in our lives.

Muslims believe that the Quran was dictated by God through the Angel Gabriel—they call him Jibreel—so that every word of the Quran, in Arabic, is the word of God. But Christians recognize the human authors of scripture. We see their personalities, at times their doubts, frustration or confusion, even their anger comes through at points. The Bible is on the one hand a testimony of its authors to their faith in and experience of God and God's will. It carries the authority of being our foundational document and our defining story. At the same time we hear God speak when we read it. It becomes a means of grace.

Paul says all scripture is inspired by God, but what does he mean by that? There was no Bible then as we know it now. But there were sacred writings or scrolls that carried weight and authority for the people and were used in worship. Paul believed scripture was God-influenced, or that God breathes through it, and he said in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 “All scripture is inspired by God, useful for teaching, for showing mistakes, for correcting, and for training character, so that the person who belongs to God can be equipped to do everything that is good.” Scripture is meant to help us to know God’s will, to grow in our faith, to shape us and equip us to serve God. But it is not as simple as “God said it, that settles it.” Instead we come to the task of reading scripture and then we must interpret it based on its historical context, who it was written to and how does all of it relate to us today.

In the Sermon on the Mount we read Jesus saying,

“You have heard that it was said of old...”

and then he quotes scripture or some part of the oral law or tradition of the Jews based upon scripture, and then he says,

“But I say to you...”

and he offers some alternative to what the scripture said, or interprets it differently than people typically did.

The apostles too, believed in interpretation and even that some scriptures might not reflect the timeless will of God. Paul really upset the apple cart when he suggested that despite the clear command for God’s people to be circumcised—starting with Abraham and including the Law of Moses, and that this was a sign of the covenant between God and his people, he believed that Jesus had made a new covenant with humanity and circumcision no longer applied to the people of the 1st century. He and the rest of the apostles came to believe that most of the rest of the Law remained a guide, but was no longer required by God, and parts were no longer in any way applicable – like the prohibitions on eating certain foods. God said it - they took the Bible seriously, they believed God spoke through it, but that didn’t settle it - they also vigorously debated its meaning in light of Jesus Christ – who he is and what he taught us.

John says of Jesus he is “the Word made flesh.” He is the definitive Word from God, he is the unmitigated or pure Word of God. He is the only inerrant – without error, and infallible – without fault, Word of God. God wrapped his message in human flesh in the form of his Son Jesus, so when we look at Jesus we see God’s will, God’s purposes, God’s plan, God’s character.

So I’m going to read everything in scripture in the light of Jesus. Anything in scripture that does not align with the picture of God we see and hear in Jesus, I believe there is room to at least question and discuss. In the Old Testament Moses commanded the Israelites slaughter thousands upon thousands of people including children in their conquest of Canaan. Jesus commanded his disciples to love their enemies and cursed anyone who would hurt a child. Moses commanded priests whose daughters became prostitutes to burn their daughters alive. Jesus loved prostitutes and showed mercy to them.

I see all of the rest of Scripture through Jesus. He said two great commandments summarized the Law and the Prophets: “Love God with all your heart” and “love your neighbor as you love yourself.” These are both found in the Old Testament. If these summarize the essence of the message, then anything in scripture that does not align with these, we might question.

Now all of this may sound like I and Pastor Adam is just picking and choosing. But the reality is each and every one of us picks and chooses. The important thing is to pick and choose the right things. That’s what I encourage you to recognize. When we say, “God said it, I believe it, that settles it” we usually say that about somebody else’s sin or something that somebody else is doing wrong and we’re pointing our finger at them as opposed to recognizing the Bible doesn’t quite work that way. And thank God it doesn’t. And that there is permission for us, we are meant to read the Bible, we’re meant to be people of the book and we’re meant to read it carefully, and understand it.

There was a T-shirt worn by a rabbi that captured his way of understanding scripture:

“God said it. I interpreted it as best I could in light of all the filters imposed by my upbringing and culture, which I try to control but you can never do a perfect job. That doesn’t exactly settle it but it does give me enough of a platform to base my values and decisions on.”

I love the Bible, I read the Bible every day. It is my defining story. My life was changed by its words and my life continues to be changed by them. I try to live its teachings every day. I try to interpret it faithfully and carefully. It shapes my life. And, sometimes I wrestle with it.

Our scripture reading today is probably one we have never heard in church before; it has to do with our bathroom habits.

Deuteronomy 23:12-14

New Revised Standard Version

You shall have a designated area outside the camp to which you shall go. With your utensils you shall have a trowel; when you relieve yourself outside, you shall dig a hole with it and then cover up your excrement. Because the Lord your God travels along with your camp, to save you and to hand over your enemies to you, therefore your camp must be holy, so that he may not see anything indecent among you and turn away from you.

May God add a blessing to the reading and hearing of this interesting passage of scripture.