

## *Half Truths*

### ***“God Said It, I Believe It, That Settles It”***

#### [Deuteronomy 23:12-14](#)

We are continuing with our sermon series, Half Truths, where we examine 5 statements that are quite popular among Christian believers. They are “Everything happens for a reason;” “God helps those who help themselves;” “God won’t give you more than you can handle;” “God said it, I believe it, that settles it;” and “Love the sinner, hate the sin.” These statements are so commonly uttered that people think that they are biblical. In fact, some people feel offended and become defensive when these beliefs are questioned. So far, we have explored the first three statements and discovered that they are not found in the Bible. They sound like they might be true but are not; they are only half-truths.

Today, we come to the 4th statement: “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.” Like the three statements we have examined already, this statement also seems like it could be a true statement of faith. Actually, I think what is implied in the first part of the statement, “God said it” is that “The Bible says it.” This comes from a belief and understanding of the Bible as the literal Word of God.” The challenge here is that the Bible has many scriptures, especially in the Old Testament, that do not make sense to us if we take them literally. The scripture Mark Shepherd read for us just a few minutes ago from Deuteronomy, chapter 23, verses 12-14 is one of them.

Perhaps some of you are still in disbelief about the reading, which talks about where to relieve oneself during worship service. During Mark’s reading, I could almost hear some of you mumbling this word, “TMI, too much information...” Mary Ann Gee, who helps me with the worship planning, asked me about the choice of the scripture more than once. She said, “Pastor, are you serious? Are you really going to have this text read in worship?”

However, believe it or not, this was the scripture passage churches in the 1880s often used to settle their debates on the merits of indoor plumbing. At that time, indoor plumbing was a new innovation. As it was becoming more widely available and popular in American homes, people began to talk about the benefits of installing it in church buildings. Soon, church leaders found themselves engaged in a debate on whether it was appropriate to install indoor toilets in their church, replacing outhouses. Preachers unwilling to embrace modernization started to preach from this text in Deuteronomy, arguing that indoor plumbing would profane the holy house of God.

Now, this debate over having indoor restrooms in church sounds rather silly and ridiculous to us in 2018, but, it was no joking matter in the 1880s. It was a serious debate. And, it wasn’t unreasonable for good Christians of that era to believe that it was wrong to have restrooms located inside the church building -- as we have all heard, if we take the passage literally, which is one part of a set of regulations and practices observed by ancient Israelites during their journey in the wilderness, restrooms are to be located outside.

And, you can find plenty of other passages from the Bible where a literal reading would lead to problems in our day and age. Here are some examples:

- *“Do your work for six days, but the seventh day shall be holy to you, a Sabbath of complete rest for the Lord. Whoever does any work on Sabbath will be put to death. Don’t start a fire in any of your homes on the Sabbath day.”* (Exodus 35:2-3, CEB)
- *“Now if someone has a consistently stubborn and rebellious child, who refuses to listen to their father and mother—even when the parents discipline him, he won’t listen to them ... Then all the people of that town will stone him until he dies.”* (Deuteronomy 21:18 & 21, CEB)
- In the next verse, *“If a man is found sleeping with another man’s wife, both the man who slept with her and the woman must die.”* (Deuteronomy 22:22, NIV)
- *“...Do not plant your field with two kinds of seeds. Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material.”* (Leviticus 19:19, NIV)
- *Do not cut the hair at your sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard. Do not.... put tattoo marks on yourselves.* (Leviticus 19: 27-28, NIV)

I am sure none of us believe that such arcane rules which are found in Scripture should still be applied and practiced in the lives of people today. We know we cannot read scriptures like these and simply say, “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.”

Yet, in the 1800s, this approach to the Bible was used by many preachers to justify and condone slavery. They pointed to the fact that there are more than 200 scriptures throughout the Bible that address slavery and affirm the practice. They argued slavery was the social order God created for the world. They viewed particularly, the gospel Luke, in chapter 12, verse 47 as evidence for Jesus’ affirmation of slavery. It reads, *“The servant who knows his master’s will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows.”*

Slaveholders used this text to justify the cruel physical abuses they would inflict upon their slaves. However, we know that interpretation is necessary here if it is to be compatible with the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. We know that, if we place them into context, Jesus was not speaking to endorse the practice of slavery but to illustrate a deeper point. We know that overwhelmingly, the scriptures point us to mirror God’s love and mercy, justice and peace in our relationships with others.

“God said it, I believe it, that settles it.” We see this kind of approach to the Bible around the issues of women’s leadership in the church, too. Those who argue against women’s leadership in the church are found of quoting the words of the apostle Paul. In 1 Corinthians, chapter 14, verse 33b-35, he says, *“Like in all the churches of God’s people, the women should be quiet during the meeting. They are not allowed to talk. Instead, they need to get under control, just as the Law says. If they want to learn something, they should ask their husbands at home. It is disgraceful for a woman to talk during the meeting.”* And, in 1 Timothy, chapter 2, verses 11 and 12, he says, *“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.”*

I am sure Paul’s views concerning a woman’s role in the church made perfect sense to the people of his time. While women’s status was elevated in the early church, thanks to Jesus’ ministry of empowering the powerless, women in general were still considered to be men’s property in the first century. We certainly cannot adopt such antiquated standards to bar women’s leadership in the church today. Yet, quite

unfortunately, some denominational or non-denominational churches still use these scriptures to deny women's leadership in the pulpit or even in Sunday School.

About three years ago, one of the neighbors of the church I was serving in Illinois called the church to complain about the rainbow flag that we had been flying in front of the church for over a month. Originally, we were going to display the flag just for a special event we were hosting. It was an annual gathering of Reconciling Methodists in the Midwest. But, when it was vandalized twice, the church council decided to keep the flag up for a few more weeks and months as a witness to the unwavering love of God. Actually, when the news of the vandalized rainbow flag was out, some people brought to us a new flag in solidarity!

The woman on the phone sounded very upset. She said, "Your church should not fly the gay flag. It's wrong. The Bible says homosexuality is a sin." She asked me if the church was teaching that homosexuality was a sin. While I was trying to answer her question, she got more upset because she soon realized that I was not going to agree with her on the subject. She said angrily, "You are a liar because you are not teaching people the Bible. Homosexuality is a sin. The Bible says so. I feel so sorry for you. I feel so sorry for people in your church. I will pray for them. I will pray for your church. I will pray for you, too. What's your name?" I answered, "My name is pastor..." Even before I said my name, she interrupted me by saying, actually, she was screaming, "Pastor? A female pastor? Huh!" Then, she hung up. Apparently, the fact that a female pastor was not teaching her congregation biblical understanding about homosexuality was too much for her to deal with...

What the woman on the phone was telling me was basically what we are examining today: "God said it; I believe it; That settles it!" However, actually, this popular phrase is not really helpful when it comes to our interpretation and understanding of the Bible. The first part, "God said it" is actually more closely aligned to the perspective that Muslims have towards the Quran. They believe that their holy book was verbally revealed by God through the Angel Gabriel, dictated to Muhammad, peace be upon him, over a period of years.

But, this is not our view of the Bible. We, Christians believe that the Bible was not dictated by God, but rather was inspired by God. We believe that many different authors were involved in the development and writing of the 66 books of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. We believe that God worked with and through the biblical authors who wrote them in particular times and places, to serve varying agendas and purposes, for specific people and communities, in different circumstances and perspectives. We believe that the Holy Spirit, who worked with the authors, inspiring their writing, continues to influence us as we read scripture. We believe that God who spoke to our ancestors of faith continues to speak to us through the revelation given to them.

So we read the Bible and seek to hear God speak to us through Scripture. In order for the Bible to still speak to us today as it did for our ancestors of faith, we must interpret the Bible in a way that makes it authentic to our experience. We must see it in new and fresh ways. And yet, the lens with which we interpret the scriptures in the Bible, both the Old Testament and the New Testament, remains consistent to the practices of our forefathers and foremothers of faith. We interpret the Word of God through the lens of Jesus' life and ministry, for he was the Word made flesh. His teachings about God and God's kingdom and

the reality of his life, death, and resurrection become the fount of our understanding. So, when we interpret the Bible, we have to question the scriptures which are inconsistent with Jesus' words and teachings.

For example, as we heard earlier, the Bible talks about the death penalty for the act of adultery. But, what did Jesus do when a woman who was caught in the act of adultery was brought to him by people who were about to stone her? Jesus told them, "Whoever has not sinned should throw the first stone" (John 8:7b). Jesus did not excuse her sin, but forgave it, commanding her to sin no more. Likewise, when we read other scriptures in light of Jesus' words and actions, we must see how God seeks to heal and restore -- for God did not send his Son into the world to condemn us, but to save us through him (John. 3:17).

And, in the light of Jesus' words and actions is where the half-truth of the statement, "God said it, I believe it, That settles it" is revealed for what it is. If we are being honest, when we say, "God said it, I believe it, That settle it," it is usually in condemnation. It is to judge someone else's sin. By saying the phrase, we are pointing our finger at someone else, accusing them of being outside our narrow definition of what it means to be Christian. And, in doing so, we Christians, people of the Good Book, end up turning the radical, transforming message of mercy, grace, and forgiveness that is extended to all into something we can control and manipulate. We turn a message of salvation into a message of damnation for people who disagree with our interpretation of truth.

Brothers and Sisters, if we are to boldly proclaim anything as settled, may it be that Jesus Christ died for all sinners, including you and me; that by his life, death and resurrection, we have been redeemed as a new creation. And may the belief which settles it in our interactions with those around us be our willingness to forgive, our willingness to extend mercy, and our willingness to love. For in doing so, we pour forth onto God's creation that which we have first graciously received from God.

Thanks be to God! Amen.