

Jan 28 –

Sermon: God Said It, I Believe It, That Settles It

Scripture: 2 Timothy 3:14-17

Do a quick Google search and you will find thousands of hits concerning the slogan, “God Said it, I Believe it, That Settles it.” It certainly sounds right. If God says something, of course we should believe it. If we had a question, and the angel of God stood before us and told us God’s answer, that would indeed settle the matter. What Christians generally mean when using this phrase is that whatever they are saying or doing is in the Bible, therefore, they believe it, and that settles it. What could possibly be only half true about this statement concerning Scripture?

Adam Hamilton places this phrase on his list of half-truths because he believes that it oversimplifies our reading of Scripture. If we strictly adhere to this approach, we can find ourselves setting all kinds of unusual limits on our behavior, even down to where believers are allowed to go to the bathroom. Probably no one here has ever heard a sermon on Deuteronomy 23:12-14.

*“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.”*

Yet, that scripture was often used in the late 1880’s. Can you guess why? Indoor plumbing was becoming widely available for the first time and churches were beginning to debate its merits. Many wanted to update their churches but in the 1880’s this passage from Deuteronomy was taken by many to mean that God was against indoor plumbing. Since the Israelites were to set up an area outside their encampments for relieving themselves because God might “turn away” from them if God saw something indecent and churches are a holy place, then churches should have outhouses because

an indoor toilet would defile God's holy place. Some churches were kept for decades from modernizing their facilities because "God said it, I believe it, that settles it."

Taken to an extreme there are many ways it would alter our lives.

Don't wear blended fabrics. Leviticus 19:19

Eliminate pork and shrimp from your diet. Leviticus 11:7-12

Men, don't trim the edges of your beard. Leviticus 19:27

Most of us have not read the Old Testament passages listed above. The book of Leviticus is not one of those that people scan for spiritual edification. We ignore it and, when someone brings up some of these laws, the typical Christian response is that these Old Testament verses reflect God's covenant with Israel but are no longer binding upon Christians. Yet Jesus said that he had not come to abolish the law but to fulfill the law. So what do we do with verses like these?

We need to understand that we all interpret the Bible. Even Jesus! Sometimes Jesus was more forgiving to people condemned by the law and other times he seemed to have an even stricter interpretation than the opinion commonly held. This we can say, Jesus did not interpret the Torah in a "God said it..." kind of way. He had a very liberal, we could say fluid, interpretation of the law in general, and especially the Sabbath laws.

The disciples, after Jesus' death, also felt the need to interpret the scriptures. We have the famous Jerusalem Council, when they gathered together to discuss the issue of whether Gentiles needed to be circumcised before they could be baptized as Christians. After much prayer and reflection, they chose to set aside all of those laws concerning circumcision, saying they were not binding. This was a big deal because up until that time circumcision was seen as a sign of the covenant, a symbol of God claiming you as God's own. Now they were saying that no longer applied. The fact is we all interpret scripture.

We accept some scriptures, Old and New Testament, as binding on our behavior today, and we have decided that others do not fit within our understanding of faith or modern lifestyles. The charge that is tossed at us when we choose to ignore one

scripture in light of another is that we pick and choose the verses that comfort us and confirm our opinions, and ignore others we don't like. But if we all pick and choose, and we do, because none of us is going to stone our children to death for minor offenses, and we were not awake at sunrise to be here as I offered to God the sacrifice of the day, how do we read the Bible? How do we interpret what it says?

The first thing we must understand is that this phrase, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it," is not as helpful as we think when it comes to interpreting the Bible, nor does it reflect the way Jesus and the apostles looked at Scripture. It assumes that the words of Scripture were, in essence, dictated by God to the Biblical authors. In a few cases, Biblical writers claim that they received God's words that they were to write down, but for the most part, they do not claim such authority for their words. Yes, we believe that the Holy Spirit inspired them, but that is different from saying these are the literal words of God. The fact is that when we see something written in Scripture that really doesn't settle it. There are a whole host of factors that go into understanding the Biblical text.

First, there is language. The people of the Bible spoke, Hebrew, Aramaic, and, in the New Testament, Greek, and some probably also spoke Latin. Much of the Bible began as oral tradition passed down from generation to generation. Jewish scholars believe that much of the first five books of the Bible, the Torah, were not written down in anything close to their final form until the Jewish captivity in Babylon, some five hundred years after they entered the Promised Land. In the New Testament the earliest Gospel was still thirty years after Jesus' death. And though their memories were good, can any of us say that the transmission was without fault and didn't allow biases to creep in? Then we have the issue of errors in copying written texts. We can identify where there have been errors, some deliberate, that crept into the New Testament by examining older copies. When it comes to translating text from one language to another you have additional problems. It is never perfect. Take for example the word "love." The Greeks identify eight different types of love of which four are used in the New Testament. These Greek words have greatly different meanings, from the sexual and erotic to the selfless Love of God, yet they are all translated as love. And then last, but

not least, there is the issue of the context in which it was said. When Jesus spoke some of his parables, like the one about the widow and the unjust judge, was he using irony or not? It depends upon how you interpret the context. So, even when it is written down in the Bible it doesn't settle anything!

Like the apostles, like people of faith through thousands of years, we read Scripture and hear God speak through it. But we also ask questions of it. We consider context. We interpret. It is important to recognize that when we study Scripture our own biases can lead us to hear what we want to hear.

So what is a person of faith supposed to do? Adam Hamilton believes that the most important lens for interpreting Scripture is Jesus himself and his words and his actions. If something in the Bible is in opposition to Jesus words, we should trust Jesus.

The Old Testament says "an eye for an eye." Jesus says if someone strikes you on your left cheek turn to them your right. Which seems to be the more compelling for Christian people of faith? Again, from the ancient scriptures we see written how God commanded the Israelites to kill everyone when they entered the Promised Land, including women and children. We hear Jesus talking about loving your enemies, praying for those who persecute you. I see in Jesus one who reached out to the marginalized. He showed compassion to the woman caught in adultery, the woman at the well who had had five husbands, to the Canaanite woman wanting her daughter healed, to lepers, tax collectors, and Roman centurions. Does that not say that we should show great love, forgiveness, and grace to those whom society has placed on the margins? Jesus also battled the scribes and the Pharisees who were more concerned about the letter of law instead of the spirit of what the law was trying to have us do.

See, I believe that all of scripture must be filtered through this lens of love, grace, and forgiveness. That for me is the heart of Jesus' life and message. And so, because of that I deliberately pick and choose which scriptures are to me relevant and authoritative. I also fully understand that others, using a different set of filters will see

things from a different perspective. We are called to live with the dynamic tension of our faith.

Simple answers harm. Pointing up one passage of scripture as being definitive without struggling with its greater meaning causes great harm. We saw this with the silly example I shared about whether churches should have indoor plumbing. But, in more serious ways, the Bible was used to sanction slavery. When people began to point out that we should not treat fellow Christians this way, the slaveholder's response was to try to keep their slaves from being baptized. We see this same narrowness of focus around the role of women in the church. The Apostle Paul, because of a very specific reason, said that the women in the church should keep silent, and that they should not lead if men are present. This has led to two thousand years of limiting the role of women in the church. Many churches still feel that women should not be in positions of authority. Yet, looking at Jesus, he valued women and their intelligence, if we think about Mary and her sister Martha. Early in the church we had women in leadership. One was named an Apostle and then her name was, scholars believe, deliberately changed from feminine in the oldest text to masculine because the church did not want to deal with the idea of women apostles.

We see this battle being waged today in the church as to the role and place of GBLT people. There are strong opinions about this, so strong, it might cause a split in the United Methodist Church. For the purpose of this sermon, the problem is some point to a few select verses and say, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it" instead of wrestling with the more challenging ideas of context, history and the life of Jesus. This type of reflection is messy.

I wish there was a source to get God's word on many of these touchy issues that challenge the church and have shaken the church in the past. Even though we have the inspired word of God, we are still left with the challenge to read it, to interpret it and to ask questions about it. It is hard work, rarely brings unity and means we are always learning, changing and in need of grace.