

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

God Said It, I Believe It, That Settles It

Sunday, January 27, 2019

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2 Timothy 3:16–17

Today I continue our series called “Bumper Sticker Theology.” In this series we are taking a look at common platitudes of faith. Sometimes we see them on bumper stickers. Sometimes we hear them from well-meaning family members or friends. And perhaps some of you may say these phrases to others.

Quite often these popular phrases of faith are casually said without really thinking through what they mean. In fact, some folks think these phrases come straight from the Bible when they are nowhere to be found in scripture. So we are going to take a closer look at these popular phrases of faith and test them with scripture. My hope is that this series will encourage us to think deeper about our faith. I also hope it will help us think biblically about some of the popular theology in our culture.

Today, we are taking a look at another common cliché of faith. Let’s say it together, **“God said, I believe it, that settles it!”** Or some simply say, “God said it, that settles it!” I am grateful to Adam Hamilton and his books, *Half Truths* and *Making Sense of the Bible*. His insights were helpful as I prepared this message. Hamilton reminds us, of course, that when people make this statement, they are referring to the Bible. “The Bible said it, I believe it, that settles it.”

It sounds true and right, doesn’t it? It feels good to say it sometimes. We believe what the Bible says. We don’t question it. We don’t waver on it. No argument, end of story. Right? That sounds good and right and virtuous. But honestly, we don’t read or apply scripture that way. That statement does not reflect the way most of us use the Bible in our lives. It’s more complicated than that.

For example, if you hold to this militant understanding of the Bible, then you can never get a tattoo. Men, you can never get a haircut and you must grow out your beards. You can’t wear clothes with mixed fibers. You can’t eat shrimp, bacon, BBQ ribs, a ham sandwich, or a chili dog. And you can never throw a football. Why? Because the Bible says all of those things are unclean and against the law.

Take a look at this peculiar passage of scripture in Deuteronomy 23:

Designate a place outside the camp where you can go to relieve yourself. As part of your equipment have something to dig with, and when you relieve yourself, dig a hole and cover up your excrement. For the LORD your God

moves about in your camp to protect you and to deliver your enemies to you. Your camp must be holy, so that he will not see among you anything indecent and turn away from you. –Deuteronomy 23:12–14

I am sure you have never heard a sermon on that text have you?! And I am sure you never will again! God said it, I believe it, that settles it! Really?

What’s interesting is that this text was widely used in the church back in the 1880s because indoor plumbing was about to be introduced. And, of course, there were many in the church who thought it would be great and they advocated for it. But those who took the view of “God said it, I believe it, that settles it,” cited this text and demanded keeping outhouses and forbidding bathrooms inside the church. They feared God would be offended and not protect them if they went to the bathroom inside the church.

“God said it, I believe it, that settles it!” Really? Most of us don’t read, apply or use the Bible this way. And, if we are honest, we don’t want to! Take a look at this text from Leviticus:

“Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death. Because they have cursed their father or mother, their blood will be on their own head.” –Leviticus 20:9

Or what about this one? Any of you work yesterday?

“Whoever works on the Sabbath shall be put to death.” –Exodus 35:2

In fact, there is a moment in scripture when Moses sees a man looking for firewood on the Sabbath. When Moses asked God, “What should I do?” God told Moses to execute him.

In Deuteronomy 22, it says that if a man marries a woman who is not a virgin, the following should occur:

She shall be brought to the door of her father’s house and there the men of her town shall stone her to death. –Deuteronomy 22:21

God said it, I believe it, that settles it? I don’t think so.

In the mid 1800s, most Southern preachers supported slavery. And you know how they did it? By pointing to over

220 verses in the Bible that support slavery. For example, in Exodus 21 we read:

Anyone who beats their male or female slave with a rod must be punished if the slave dies as a direct result, but they are not to be punished if the slave recovers after a day or two, since the slave is their property. –Exodus 21:20–21

Of course, in the New Testament we also find verses that support slavery. In fact, historians have discovered that over half of the pro slavery literature written before the Civil War was written by pastors. These pastors often cited scripture to back up their position.

Many of you have seen the movie “12 Years a Slave.” It’s a powerful movie that I recommend to you. In the movie there is a scene where a slave is about to be beaten and the slave owner quotes from Luke 12 before he beats her:

The servant who knows the master’s will and does not get ready or does not do what the master wants will be beaten with many blows. –Luke 12:47

God said it, I believe it, that settles it? Really?

Let’s move from the issue of slavery to the role of women in the Bible. In 1st Timothy we read:

I also want the women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, adorning themselves, not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes. –1st Timothy 2:9

I guess we are not allowed to have jewelry in church. So I have spoken with all of the ushers and have asked them to come forward and pass the plate so you can put all of your rings, gold and jewelry in there. It will really help us with our capital campaign!

Of course, the Apostle Paul has not been a favorite Christian figure for many women. Look at what he says in 1st Corinthians 14:

Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church. –1st Corinthians 14:34–35

Paul also said in 1st Timothy:

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. –1st Timothy 2:11–12

Clearly, Paul was never married or he would have never said these things!

God said it, I believe it, that settles it?

What do we say about Paul? Was he just a male chauvinist? Was he really inspired? Well, Paul was inspired but he was also a product of the time in which he lived. When Paul wrote these words, women had no rights, no property and no source of income. Now, if Paul were writing today, I think his words about women would be a lot different. But we can’t hold Paul who lived in the first century to the same standards of our time where we have progressed in seeing that male and female are equal.

The good news is that in the gospels we find that Jesus treated women as equal. He broke many taboos when it came to the role of women. He ministered to them and called them as disciples. In fact, the first evangelists in the gospels were women!

Unfortunately, many churches do not interpret Paul’s texts in light of the gospel and our context today. They still hold to a literal understanding of Paul’s words. So you will often find churches in our community where women can’t hold leadership positions. They can’t teach or preach and must be submissive to men. I am glad that we are part of a denomination that doesn’t interpret Paul’s words this way. The United Methodist Church has always been a forerunner in lifting up the rights of women in society and ministry. We were one of the first denominations to ordain women as ministers.

“God said it, I believe it, that settles it” is oversimplistic and does not reflect how we read and apply scripture. So, how do we or how should we read, interpret and apply scripture responsibly as Christians?

I don’t believe that God dictated his words through an angel to the writers of the Bible. It’s not like they were put in some trance and God forced their hands to write exactly what God wanted. Instead, most Christians believe that God inspired the writers of the Bible within their own humanity and frame of reference. They wrote in light of their cultural setting, their limited understanding of science, and their biases and perspective. God moved them within their own context.

Throughout the years this has been church’s way of seeing the inspiration of the Bible. The Hebrew people and the early church would have never held to the view of “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.” In fact, Jesus, Paul, and the Apostles knew the Bible needed to be interpreted and applied in new ways. When referencing the Law, Jesus would often say, “You have heard it was said, but I say unto you ...” Paul didn’t feel that God cared whether or not Gentile Christian men got circumcised even though that was a strict law since Abraham. In Acts 15 we read about the Apostles agreeing that new Christians are not required to adhere to much of the old Law. They all knew the Bible needed to be reinterpreted and reapplied in new ways as the world changed and progressed.

To say the Bible is inspired means the Bible is a living and breathing document that contains God-inspired ideas that continue to inspire. That’s what the Bible says about itself in **2nd Timothy 3:16–17**, “**All scripture is inspired by**

God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.” The word “inspired” in this verse means, “God breathed.” God did not force or coerce the writers of the Bible; God breathed on them. God’s divinity moved within their humanity to show us who he is and who he wants us to be.

Biblical writers were indeed inspired, but they were also human. They had frailties and limitations. They had their own frame of reference. They wrote in a pre-scientific age. They were limited by their own historical context. But their humanity does not negate their inspiration. In fact, it supports it. Luther said “the Bible is the manger which carries the Christ.” The Bible shows that God chose to reveal himself in the messiness of humanity. The Bible is human and divine, just like Jesus. And that is a beautiful expression of God.

This view shows the dynamic quality of God’s inspiration—that the words of the Bible are not dictated words stuck in the past; they are human words that contain God inspired ideas that moved people in the past and still move people today!

The Bible is made up of many different parts. There is poetry, history, law, gospel, stories, narratives. There is a richness to the Bible which requires receiving it in a variety of ways. Appreciating the Bible means interpreting the Bible. The style of literature used and the context of the passage determine how we receive the Bible. This seems so simple, but it is amazing how many Christians don’t interpret the Bible this way. Instead, some Christians see the Bible as a mathematical text book that contains facts that can’t be questioned. Viewing the Bible this way limits how the Bible can transform us.

Take the four gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Each of these gospels shed a different light on Jesus. Each gospel writer had a different experience of Jesus and chose to focus on specific aspects of his life and ministry. Does this negate the ministry of Jesus or somehow diminish the credibility of the gospel writers? No! They experienced Jesus in different ways, just like each one of us.

The Bible becomes true as it becomes true in our own lives. The Bible is true insofar as we personally encounter its truth. The living word of God connects with us as we are willing to be open to its truth. The Bible was not inspired to be a book of facts; it is inspired to be a book of truth. There is a big difference. Everyone can receive facts, but not everyone is open to truth.

In order for the Bible to be true for me or you or anyone, we must bring one thing to the reading of it—faith. We must be willing to allow the Holy Spirit to guide our reading of it. We don’t worship the Bible; we worship the God of the Bible. The Bible points to God. Until you have faith, the Bible will have no meaning. But once you surrender your life to God, the Bible becomes a living and breathing book where you encounter God. It becomes a profound account of how God has related to the world throughout history and how God

will relate to you today. It becomes a mirror where you see yourself and a light showing where you need to be. It becomes God-breathed for you.

So what does this mean on a practical level? Well, instead of saying, “God, said it, I believe it that settles it,” we should say, “The Bible said it, I’m going to take it seriously and I am going to study it in light of what Jesus taught us.”

The mistake many Christians make is thinking that the Bible is the “Word of God.” No, Jesus is the “Word of God.” The Bible reveals the “Word of God,” who is Jesus. The first chapter of the gospel of John explains it beautifully:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind ... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. –John 1:1–4, 14

God wrapped his message, love and character and will in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the infallible Word of God. So, therefore, Jesus is the lens through which we read the Bible.

For example, when I read in the Old Testament that if a priest’s daughter becomes a prostitute, she is to be bound and burned alive by her father, I don’t say, “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.” I say, “No, Jesus was a friend to prostitutes and loved them and taught them and therefore I should treat them as Jesus treated them.”

When I read in the Bible that God commanded 42,000 foreign men and women to be killed in one day, I don’t say, “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.” Instead, I say, “Jesus said to love our enemies. Killing doesn’t capture the heart and character of God.”

When all else fails, I remember that love is the highest law. Jesus said so. He said the law could be summed up this way: “Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength and your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37–39).

At the end of the day the Bible is not meant to be debated; it is meant to be read. God breathes on us when we read it. God guides us and feeds us and empowers us through the same ideas that inspired Abraham, Moses, the Prophets, the disciples and Paul.

When I think of Abraham and Sarah and how God blessed them with a child in their old age, I think of a couple who told me that they had prayed and prayed to have a child and they thought it wasn’t to be. They reread the story of Abraham and Sarah and had faith. One day they got the news! They were pregnant!

I read about King David and think of people who come to see me who feel they have done too many bad things.

They think they are of no use to God. And then I tell them the story of David and they light up! They have hope!

I think of being at the bedside of someone who is sick and providing comfort and strength by saying, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want ...”

I think of little children who run around saying and doing the craziest and yet the wisest things and I think of Jesus words, “Unless you can become like a child you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”

I think of the values of this world and how they often get confused with the values of God and I remember Jesus’ words, “The last shall be first and the first shall be last He who would be great in the Kingdom must be a servant.”

When I am anxious I read, “Be still and know that I am God.” When I mess up and hurt others, I remember, “Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way.”

Read the Bible. If you have never read it, give it a try. Ask God to help you read it and get a good commentary. Just try it and see. What do you have to lose? As someone once said, “The Bible doesn’t just increase knowledge; it changes lives. The Bible doesn’t just talk about us; it talks to us. The Bible brings us back to our senses.”

NOTE: Adam Hamilton’s books *Making Sense of the Bible* and *Half Truths*, along with William Barclay’s *Commentaries* were helpful resources as I prepared this sermon.

Questions for discussion/reflection:

1. Are there passages of scripture that you have found concerning, disturbing or difficult to accept? What are they? How does this sermon help you make sense of them?
2. How does seeing scripture through the lens of Jesus help you interpret the Bible? How do you feel about seeing Jesus as the ‘Word of God’?
3. In what way is the Bible inspired? Does this sermon change the way you view the inspiration of scripture? Why or why not?