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“GOD SAID IT, I BELIEVE IT, THAT SETTLES IT...REALLY”

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Scripture: Deuteronomy 23:12-14

“God said it, I believe it, that settles it,” is another phrase we hear tossed around a lot by Christians. So we are going to give some thought to this phrase today as we continue our sermon series, “Answering the Hard Questions,” where we explore the true meaning behind some phrases Christians and others say that sound Biblical but really are not. Last week we considered the phrase, “God won’t give you more that you can handle,” and we talked about how God WILL give you more than you can handle, but God won’t give you more than HE can handle. The week before that, we looked at the phrase, “God helps those who help themselves,” and how it is true that we have to put some effort into a lot of things, but that there are also times when we will be unable to “help ourselves”, and God is present with us and provides for us in those times of need. And if you remember, we began the series by thinking about the saying, “Everything happens for a reason.” We talked about how some things happen for a reason, either because of the choices of ourselves or others, or because of the sort of natural order of things, but that God doesn’t will all things in our lives, and especially God does not wish bad for us. God wants us to experience abundant life.

So this phrase, “God said it, I believe it, that settles it;” what exactly are we trying to convey when we use this? I think for the most part what is implied by saying, “God said it,” is that the Bible says it. And this is the implication, of course, because the Bible is the “Word of God.” The problem is, the Bible is both the Old and New Testaments, and there are all these laws and regulations laid out, especially in the Old Testament, that aren’t applicable anymore and just don’t make sense in light of Christ’s revelation. And so it’s not so simple as to say, “God said it,” or “the Bible says it,” so “that settles it.”

We heard Jesus wrestling with this very thing in our gospel reading from Matthew this morning. In this series of teachings, Jesus lays out these various laws and regulations from the Mosaic Law of the Old Testament, but then with each one, he revises the ordinance. So it goes something like this: “You’ve been taught such-and-such, but really it should be so-and-so.” “You have heard that it was said to those who lived long ago, don’t commit murder, and all who commit murder will be in danger of judgment. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with their brother or sister will be in danger of judgment.” Or “You’ve heard it said that you should love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say love your enemies and pray for those who harass you.” So, we can see, even in the foundational teachings from Christ in the Sermon on the Mount that he is wrestling with this idea that “God said it, so that settles it.” And it should not be so simplistic for us, either.

Part of the problem with this phrase is that we use it to prove a point. To show that we are right, or that someone else is wrong. Let me share with you a rather funny example from the

Bible. The truth is, there are several examples, but this one is particularly humorous. Back in the 1830s, indoor plumbing was beginning to emerge, and churches and others began talking about adding toilets to their buildings to replace the outhouses in use at the time. The problem was this seemingly obscure and pesky passage of scripture from Deuteronomy. Here's what it says: *"The latrines must be outside the camp. You will use them there, outside the camp. Carry a shovel with the rest of your gear; once you have relieved yourself, use it to dig a hole, then refill it, covering your excrement. Do these things because the Lord your God travels with you, right in the middle of your camp, ready to save you and to hand your enemies over to you. For this reason your camp must be holy. The Lord must not see anything indecent among you, or he will turn away from you."* Now, isn't that interesting! So preachers started preaching from this text and arguing that toilets couldn't be in the church because that was indecent, it would defile the Lord's house. Thus, it was better to keep the outhouses out back, away from the building, the church. People were basically using this passage of Scripture to support their belief that the church needed to stick with the outhouses; thus, in a sense saying, "God said, I believe it, that settles it!"

Here's the thing: it doesn't take a genius to know that modern plumbing is much more hygienic than the outhouses of old. So certainly, the Bible basically says that we shouldn't use the bathroom in the church, but that's a regulation that just doesn't make sense in modern times. Then, of course, there are many other passages that we don't apply in a literal way anymore. Regulations like not eating pork or shrimp; the rules about men not trimming their beards or cutting their hair—again, not relevant. In Exodus, the Israelites are commanded that if a child curses his parents, he is to be put to death; or if you work on the Sabbath, you are to be put to death. Or, if it is discovered that a priest's daughter is not a virgin when she is married, then her father is to stone her to death. Can you imagine? Can you think of any reason that you would stone your child to death? So many of these laws in the Bible, and particularly the Old Testament, are simply not relevant and applicable anymore, especially in light of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

Here's the thing, we revere the Bible as the "Word of God." And to different people, that means different things. For some, the Bible is the literal word of God—it was dictated by God to humans, who wrote down word-for-word what God said to them. On the other extreme are those who see the Bible simply as a work of literature—the craft of humans living in the Ancient Near East in the centuries surrounding the turn of the era, what we recognize as Christ's birth. What Methodists believe about the Bible falls somewhere in between these two extremes. We do believe the Bible is the word of God, but for us, it is the inspired word of God containing many truths, but not the literal, spoken word of God. John Wesley once said that the Bible contains "all things necessary for salvation." And so, without a doubt, the Bible reveals to us many truths about who God is and how God relates to humanity. But ultimately, the greatest revelation of God is Jesus Christ himself. The opening chapter of John's Gospel tells us that Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh. Christ is God's Word embodied, incarnated.

Here's what matters. When asked by a legal scholar, "What's the greatest commandment?" Christ responded with this, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul

and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” With that command, Christ teaches that we are to view everything else in light of the law of love for God and others. Because Christ is the Word made flesh, we have to read everything else in light of Jesus Christ, and if it doesn’t line up with Jesus, then we go with the revelation of Christ. Sometimes in the Old Testament, the Israelites are instructed to kill their enemies. But Christ tells us that we are to love your enemies. We heard Christ’s reinterpretation of several regulations in our Scripture passage this morning. In the same way, we have to filter what we read in the Bible through the lens of Christ, and sometimes it’s not what the words say, but what the Word says that “settles it.”

Now, when we start talking about a “filter,” I realize that it becomes easy to just “shrug off” the difficult passages and commands of Scripture by saying, “that doesn’t apply,” or “that’s not relevant anymore.” But we can’t go to that extreme either. The call of Christ requires far more of us than most of us will ever give; it requires sacrifice, it requires doing the tough thing. We have to take seriously the word of God as contained in the Bible as revealed in Jesus Christ. But we cannot and should not go to the extreme of using the Bible to defend our bad actions and poor decisions, or to attack the bad actions of poor decisions of others. Ultimately, we need to act in a way that reveals Christ’s love and helps others and ourselves grow in our relationship with God. And sometimes that means we need to examine and interpret the Scriptures with more depth than just the simple, “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.”

There was a rabbi who made up a t-shirt not too long ago, and it said this: “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.”

God’s word matters. It is the most important word we will ever read; it should and will shape our lives. But it is far too complicated for a simple adherence. Rather than, “God said it, I believe it, that settles it,” it would be better for us to say something like, “God said it. I take it seriously and do my very best to understand how it applies to my life today.”

May we pray and seek God’s will and God’s way in our lives every single day.