

SERMON: God Said It, I Believe It, That Settles It?

TEXT: Matthew 5:17-20

Indoor plumbing. No one had ever heard of such a thing until it became widely available in the 1880's. In our day, we can't imagine living without it. Who would choose to go without? But not everyone immediately embraced the idea. Many churches, in particular, were hesitant. After all, God was against indoor plumbing; that much was clear, according to these words from the Bible, specifically the 23rd chapter of Deuteronomy:

*"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."* (Deuteronomy 23:12-14, NRSV)

In his book, *Half Truths*, pastor and author Adam Hamilton explained, "When the Israelites were in the wilderness, before coming into the Promised Land, the Lord was with them in their camps as they traveled. God made his residence in their midst. So, according to the instructions in Deuteronomy, the Israelites were to set up an area outside their encampments for relieving themselves. That way, the Lord would not see anything *indecent* among them. The passage explicitly says that God might *turn away* from the Israelites – that is, God might deny his blessings and protection for the people – if he saw something indecent. And it suggests that human excrement, though part of the natural workings of the human bodies that God designed, is somehow unholy and should not be allowed in God's camp."

Through the ages, Christians have referred to their church buildings as "God's house," so some believed that the same rules must apply – even when indoor plumbing became available, providing greater privacy and cleanliness for natural indecencies.

Again, it's right there in black and white, on the pages of the Holy Bible. GOD SAID IT, I BELIEVE IT, THAT SETTLES IT.

Personally, I am grateful to God for the person or persons who invented indoor plumbing. And I feel no shame in admitting that I don't follow that particular law from Deuteronomy. Such a law was appropriate for those people living in that place at that time. But civilization has advanced - thanks be to God! - and we don't have to live like that anymore.

Of course, there are a good many other passages in the Bible that applied to a particular people living in a particular place and time. Many of them we've realized no longer apply to us, and we are more than comfortable letting them fall by the wayside. For example, in the book of Leviticus, there is a commandment that we must eliminate pork and shrimp from our diet. (Leviticus 11:7-12) In the 21st chapter of both Exodus and Deuteronomy, it states that children who curse or strike their parents or who are persistently rebellious should be put to death. (Exodus 21:15 and

Deuteronomy 21:18-21) Tattoos are outlawed (Lev. 19:28), and men must never trim the edges of their beards (Lev. 19:27) according to Leviticus 19. GOD SAID IT, I BELIEVE IT, THAT SETTLES IT?

I was taught to read the Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament and the person of Jesus. As we read in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." Jesus was a Jewish man, raised within the Jewish tradition and the Jewish faith, and he held the law in high regard. According to one commentary, "this affirmation [that he did not come to abolish the law], by being fulfilled by Christ, does not always mean a mere repetition or continuation of the original Law. Fulfillment may mean transcendence as well." In other words, going above and beyond the Law. Particularly in Matthew, Jesus teaches that the principles of "mercy, justice, love, and covenant loyalty are the weightier matters of the Law by which the rest must be judged.... The point is that, while the Law has continuing validity, it is not ultimate, in contrast to the word of

Jesus, which is ultimately normative and will never pass away.”

(The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VIII, Matthew, Mark, pp. 186-187)

Adam Hamilton points out that Jesus interpreted the Law and the Prophets, “sometimes more liberally and sometimes more conservatively than the Pharisees with whom he was regularly interacting.” Furthermore, “Jesus’ own apostles interpreted his words...” and every person who has ever read scripture has their own interpretation. This is what makes the Bible a *living* document that continues to teach us and make sense in our lives over 2,000 years later.

The Bible is the history of God and was written by faithful people according to what they knew from their vantage point within a particular culture, a particular part of the world, at a particular time, and with a particular level of knowledge and education. They were inspired by the Holy Spirit, I have no doubt, but these are the words of men, not of God.

When I finally heard God call me into ministry, I researched several seminaries and visited a few. One visit was to a more conservative seminary outside Boston, where I was given a key to a dorm room and promptly left alone with no tour guide or host to accompany me. I found the cafeteria and was approached by a young man, whom I hoped would be more welcoming. He greeted me by asking if I was a prospective student. I said yes, and then he indicated he had just one question for me. "Do you believe in the inerrancy of the Bible?" I immediately sensed that my answer would be graded on a pass or fail basis. I hesitantly said no, hoping this would open up a conversation in which we could discuss and perhaps learn from one another. "That's all I need to know," he said. Then he turned and walked away.

No conversation. No opportunity to discuss and learn as fellow students and believers. No welcome. No acceptance. No belonging. Only judgment and rejection. GOD SAID IT, I BELIEVE IT, THAT SETTLES IT.

Adam Hamilton explains that this statement “may not be 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. Part of the reason is that it tends to oversimplify what Scripture is and how we are to read it. It assumes that the words of Scripture were, in essence, dictated by God to the biblical authors.... Yet most of the time, the biblical authors do not claim any form of dictation but claim to be writing their own insights, reflections, and ideas concerning God’s will.”

Certainly, the writers of scripture were inspired by God. As we heard from the Second Letter to Timothy, *“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.”* Further, it seems to me that all scripture never stops being useful for teaching. And teaching happens through interaction with the text and interaction with others around the text. Once

that interaction comes to halt, learning also comes to a halt. You may call that being “settled;” I call that being “squelched.”

GOD SAID IT, I BELIEVE IT, THAT SETTLES IT. The statement comes with an air of confidence and certainty. But it also feels very limited, static, immovable, closed, and final. I don't see God's word that way.

I believe God wants us to continue reading and studying, listening and learning together. I believe that God continues to speak to us both through these ancient writings and through today's conversations. I believe that God speaks to us through all of creation; through experience and exploration; through science and math; through history and current events; through language and literature and art and music and theater. God speaks to us through birth and growth and life, through love and suffering and death.



God's word cannot be contained in 66 books. And God's word is never fully "settled" until we meet our Lord face to face. Jesus is God's Word (capital W) in the flesh. God's Word lives and moves, walks and talks, laughs and cries, heals and teaches and forgives. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us... full of grace and truth."

Jesus, the Living Word, taught us the two greatest commandments: to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus said it. May we believe it. And may we never settle for anything less. To the glory of God!

AMEN.