

“The Good Life”

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I have often struggled with how you follow the laws and ordinances of God, because they do change. As you are going through the Old Testament you can even feel them evolving, and by the time you get to the New Testament, Jesus is turning those laws and ordinances often upside down. They have changed dramatically. So then, if we are supposed to follow the laws and ordinances, and if the Bible still means something, what do we do? Which ones do we follow? And, how do we know when to make changes in the laws and ordinances of God?

Because, we don't follow Leviticus the way they did in the Old Testament, otherwise there would be a lot of women in trouble - because I see you dying your hair, I see you braiding your hair. All of that would have put you in a whole lot of world of hurt. And you men, allowing your women to speak in public - and I know you allow them to. [Laughter] If we followed those rules, this place would be very different. So we know that some things have changed. Which things change and which things stay the same? It all seems to come to a head in this passage: “Follow the ordinances and you live; don't and you are cursed.” Man, you have to get it right. You want to be on the right side. So how do we respond?

Like in all things, I keep going back and finding other people and what they have to say. Hopefully I will learn something, because I don't want to go back to those 613 Levitical Codes. So I started reading an ethicist that I've been reading recently, Very interesting, and it's frustrating, because, the ethicists I was reading, like Reinhold Niebrehr, when I was younger... Now, they start this book saying, “Well, they were alright for their time, but now they are sexist, and they are Anglo-centric. In other words, they are not thinking globally.” And I'm thinking, “Oh, my gosh, what happened in such a short time of my ministry, that everything I learned ethically is now upside down and changed?”

What evolves and what can we hold on to, and when do you know the difference?

So, I continued reading this ethicist's book. She starts out by talking about how historians have now acknowledged that's how Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. He was thoroughly racist. That just set me back. And, they said, now realize you cannot agree with slavery and still be racist, but Abraham Lincoln was one of my heroes. How could this be? And the ethicist went on to explain that Lincoln was merely an average American of his time, ethically speaking, and that he was actually a victim of the racism of his own era.

They went on to say you have to be careful how you read Scripture, because Scripture, both in the Old and the New Testaments, allowed for slavery. In fact, most of the time, it just talks about slavery. It gives you ethical ways of responding to slavery: be good to your slave; give them a chance to be free at some point in time; treat them with justice; give them the faith; allow them to worship. But it never in Scripture, as far as I know, [does it talk] about the evils and exploitation of slavery. So does that mean we can affirm slavery today? That is what Lincoln was up against as a faithful person, but he was still a victim of his own era, and still struggled with his own issues of racism.

I thought about that some more, because I have shared time and time again that I dearly love and respected my grandmother. I learned the faith from her. She was a very giving person. She, in many ways, was a respecter of all people, and was truly someone who was giving and loving. But she would say the most gosh awful things sometimes. She had these phrases that she learned from her parents, and their parents before them, that were horribly racist - not to be repeated here.

It was such a disconnect as I got older, and I would go, "Granny, stop!" and she would say, "What?" She never understood the reason some of those sayings she learned were no longer appropriate and probably, as far as I'm concerned, never were appropriate, or shouldn't have been. I thought, "How can such a faithful person?" I thought about this in my 20s. "How can such a loving, faithful person, who cares for everyone, say those things?"

She was a victim of the racism of her era, but that doesn't let her off the hook. She needed to learn and transform her thinking to learn and evolve ethically, so that those phrases were removed from her vocabulary.

I got to thinking about that more, and I said, I have to convict myself. I grew up believing, and being taught in Presbyterian churches, that homosexuality was inappropriate: it was wrong, I struggled with it even into adulthood because I couldn't, while I had many gay friends, and I truly tried to love and care for everyone, I couldn't put together what the Bible was saying with the ethics of whether or not a group of people were living an inappropriate life. You can give that, whether you are dealing with racism or homosexuality or anything, it comes back to, as a Christian, I have to come to terms with what the Bible says, and not just cast it away; but come to an understanding that affirms the Bible and affirms the ethics that I carry around inside of me. The Bible transforms, so to say the Bible is against it, so I'm against it, is not fair or appropriate theology. The Bible said that slavery is acceptable as long as you treat your slaves well. I don't buy that today. So that opens up an entirely new way of looking at how we interpret the Bible ethically. What laws and ordinances are acceptable and which ones are not? Which areas of life are we victims of the racism, or sexism, or homophobia, of the time in which we are living? Then it hit me. It was shared by one of my professors: When people take the Bible too literally and they quote it as the end all, they are denying the Holy Spirit.

Now, as Presbyterians we are not real fond of the Holy Spirit, because we have seen it in Pentecostal churches; and, frankly, it scares the devil out of us [laughter], so maybe it was effective. We also don't like it because the Holy Spirit cannot be controlled. It cannot be put down in doctrine. It cannot be evaluated. It is not always fair. It doesn't always react the same way twice and so, if you can't really evaluate it [and it] doesn't fit in good doctrinal statements, we Presbyterians really would rather not deal with the Holy Spirit all that much. But my professor said, the Holy Spirit is what you *take* to the Bible. Because, while God is unchanging and is always perfect, the way God relates to human beings - who are always changing - is different. As we become more complex, our needs in society change.

It used to be a sin to have intimate relationships that did not end in childbirth because the world, in Biblical times, needed to grow, to propagate, to share the faith and to spread it. Well, society doesn't necessarily need that same goal today, and so, the motivation for the ethic changes. We also need to look at a new evaluative tool - that is the Holy Spirit asking

in every situation of ethics: who is hurt by a particular situation and who is hurt worse? So, you might ask: In an evaluative tool for a law or an ordinance for homosexuality, who is hurt by it? Certainly people who call themselves those in the LGBTQ community have been hurt by not being affirmed and being called “wrong” in the eyes of God somehow. How have others been hurt? Does living as a person in the LGBTQ community hurt others, and where is that scale and that balance?

I personally do not see that others are hurt by the LGBTQ community, but I certainly see LGBTQ [community members] being hurt. So I say to the Bible, perhaps the Holy Spirit is transforming in the complexity of our world today, what is and what is not an ordinance or a law. And, what is in the very few places that homosexuality is discussed? Perhaps it is no longer relevant, in the same way it is no longer relevant to talk about how we take care of slaves properly.

We look and have to utilize everyday prayer and how we read Scripture, when people talk about laws and ordinances, whether it's in Deuteronomy or in the book of Romans, in the Old or New Testament, whether the words of Jesus, or a prophet, or an apostle, or disciple - What is God saying today? It is amazing how God, through the Holy Spirit, is transforming our Bible to allow us - to require us - to act in new and different ways.

When I was growing up in the 1960s and 1970s in the church, I didn't know much about Social Justice. I don't know that I heard the phrase. Faith was primarily a personal situation between me and my God - we just happened to do it together on Sunday morning. But in the last 20 years, the Holy Spirit is demanding of the faithful that we do more than “love thy neighbor.” It isn't something where we provide charity, but we make substantial changes in our world; not just giving charity, but embracing people as equals, of sharing the love of God, in transforming the systems that made us abused, that made people hungry.

As the world becomes more complex so does our faith, and I feel old sometimes, because when I talk to younger ministers, they seem to get it better than I do on some days. When I sat with those middle school young adults this morning - and they are deeply concerned about issues like human trafficking - they talked about reports that they get and how concerned they were; and what can we do; and we are not doing enough; and where is God in the middle of it?

I'm going, we need to hear what they are saying, because the Holy Spirit is talking to us. We need to respond, because the laws and ordinances are changing. They are pointing at the other and saying, you need to be like us or you are not acceptable, and they are pointing back at us. The Holy Spirit is pointing at us and saying, “You are not caring enough. You are not using me - the Holy Spirit - enough, because I've given you all these tools to make change, to heal this world, and what are you doing?”

Those middle-schoolers called me (without even realizing it), called me to account this morning. They don't care about what someone is or isn't doing with their own daily lives - the Bible seems to be so concerned about it in the book of Leviticus - but they are deeply concerned about what we are *not* doing, that is destroying lives and hurting so many people, - and it requires the Holy Spirit.

I'm so pleased with what Lisa Anderson is doing with those youth. She is in the middle of planning to help them see the role of the Holy Spirit in their lives. We are teaching meditation. We are teaching them how to pray more meaningfully, and in a deeper way, not just so they can be better Christians for themselves, but so they can take the Spirit's movement as they read Scripture, as they watch the news, so they will know the difference between their own desires, and that still small voice of the Holy Spirit speaking to them and saying, "I convict you, so you will make a difference for the less fortunate."

When I was in 7th grade, my idea of loving my neighbor was about this wide [making a narrow hand gesture], but theirs is much bigger [wider hand spread]. May we all learn from them, and trust in the movement and the power of the Holy Spirit, through Jesus Christ our Lord, and the first person in the Trinity together as one, leading us forward in faith. Amen