



February 23, 2025 *God Said It, I Believe It, That Settles It?*

Scripture: 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.

The half-truth: the positive spiritual uses of Scripture

February 24, 2025 2 Timothy 2:14-15, 3:15-17

“God said it, I believe it, that settles it” rightly says Scripture is key for spiritual growth. Paul told Timothy Scripture was useful “for teaching, for showing mistakes, for correcting, and for training character, so that the person who belongs to God can be equipped to do everything that is good.” (He did not say it would answer all historical, scientific or financial questions.)

The Bible recorded God’s dealings with humans, and guides our interaction with God.

- The *United Methodist Articles of Religion*, which date back to church founder John Wesley, say, “The Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation.” That echoes Paul’s words in 2 Timothy 3:15. What parts of the Bible’s story played the biggest role in leading you to Christ and salvation by his grace? Have you ever read stories or commands in your Bible that seem NOT to contribute to that purpose?
- In 2 Timothy 2:15, Paul urged Timothy to be “one who interprets the message of truth correctly.” He knew the Scriptures required interpretation. Then in chapter 3, he listed the main roles that Scripture can play. How (if at all) is the Bible playing each of these roles in your life? How can your Bible study focus more deeply on God’s purposes for inspiring and preserving these writings?

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for moving people like Moses, David, Luke, Paul (and others whose names we don’t even know) to write the books collected in the Bible. Guide me as I study their writings, and help me hear your voice through my study. Amen.

God’s definitive revelation: a person, not a book

February 25, 2025 John 1:14-18, Hebrews 1:1-3

Every Christmas Eve, we ponder John’s amazing statement that Jesus is “the Word,” God’s ultimate revelation. The writer of Hebrews said that while God spoke through the prophets “in many times and many ways,” God’s final word was not a book, but a person: Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus “is the light of God’s glory and the imprint of God’s being.” Only through him can we rightly understand the rest of God’s story unfolded in the Bible.

- Many philosophies in John's day said a holy God could have no contact with the corrupt physical world ("flesh"). John echoed Genesis, which poetically said "in the beginning" God made the world, and declared it very good (Genesis 1:31). Then God became flesh in Jesus, and showed us what God is really like. How does Jesus, God in flesh, give you a clearer picture of what it means to be fully human than any list of laws or guidelines could?
- Sometimes we read the Bible as a set of free-standing verses, all equally true (in Pastor Scot McKnight's phrase, "morsels of truth"). But if Christ is God's ultimate word, then we need to interpret each part of the Bible in terms of how it fits with the Bible's overall story, with Jesus as its saving center. In what ways does making Jesus the ultimate standard of truth cast a different light on many of the Bible's more difficult parts?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, in you I find light and life, God's ultimate "Word" to lead me to the path of salvation. Be my guide as I wrestle to unlock the spiritual treasures contained in my Bible. Amen.

Jesus went beyond "God said it"

February 26, 2025 Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28, 38-40, 43-45

Bishop Leslie Newbigin wrote, "Most of us treat the Bible as an anthology of helpful thoughts ... from which we can obtain comfort, guidance and direction ... It is rather an interpretation of the whole of history from the creation to its end ... and is told from the point of view of the people whom God chose to be the bearers of his purpose." That's why Jesus described an ideal that went far beyond the written Mosaic Law (including two of the Ten Commandments). He clearly did not believe the written words were all we needed to know.

- We believe we've advanced far beyond the ancient world. Yet we still speak of "getting revenge" or "settling a score" in everything from sports rivalries to sweeping business deals. How does it reshape our attitudes and actions to focus on mutual love and service, not revenge? In what ways does Jesus' teaching speak to your heart about the spirit in which you deal with others?
- *The Translator's Handbook on Matthew* said, "The term [for love in verse 44] from the Old Testament always implies a sense of faithful loyalty, not mere emotion, so that expressions which approach this idea are to be preferred over those meaning merely to like someone very much." What does it look like for you to "love" people you do not "like very much," maybe even who have wronged you? How can Jesus' life and death help you re-define "love" in terms of actions rather than feelings?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for loving me with your all-in, unflinching love that would face the cross so I could choose eternal life. Teach me how to love in a way that runs deeper than good feelings. Amen.

Jesus gave a different picture of God

February 27, 2025 Deuteronomy 21:18-21, Luke 15:11-24

Deuteronomy 21:18-21 is the type of passage Pastor Hamilton had in mind when he wrote, in *Making Sense of the Bible*, "Are there things clearly taught in scripture about which we might say today, 'That really doesn't capture God's will'? Yes. Both conservatives and liberals agree on some of them." When Jesus told a story about a rebellious son, he pictured God, not as

wanting to “remove such evil,” but running down the road to embrace just such a son and welcome him home.

- Scholar N. T. Wright noted that “in a culture where senior figures are far too dignified to run anywhere, this man takes to his heels as soon as he sees his young son dragging himself home.” This is one of Jesus’ vivid pictures of what God is really like. Do you picture God eager to punish you, intimidating, looking down on you sternly? Or do you see God as a loving parent always eager to run to you and embrace you?
- Jesus told this story to answer a complaint from the religious leaders that he welcomed sinners, even ate with them (Luke 15:2). Few characters in Jesus’ teaching are less “deserving” than this grating, ungrateful son—but all that mattered was that he came home. How do you react when God (and God’s family, your church) welcome people you see as undeserving sinners? How, if at all, have your feelings changed over time?

Prayer: Dear God, I welcome your promised presence with me as I study my Bible. Teach me about how you have acted to redeem me, and how you can make my life a redemptive force for others. Amen.

Jesus did not let the law block mercy

February 28, 2025 Leviticus 20:10, 21:9, John 8:2-11

The Pharisees quoted Scripture, almost correctly, in a “God said it” way, implying that Jesus must endorse stoning the woman. Their self-righteousness had turned vicious (they brought only the woman, though Leviticus said to stone the man AND the woman). Jesus said there were two great commandments (cf. Matthew 22:34-40), and one was, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” He wouldn’t give binding force to written laws at odds with that. “Neither do I condemn you,” he told the woman, after her accusers slunk away.

- Jesus said, “Whoever hasn’t sinned should throw the first stone.” The accusers left. Jesus, who WAS sinless, didn’t want to throw stones. Who are the people at whom you (perhaps quoting one or more Bible verses) feel like throwing stones? Lay before Jesus the reasons (fears, feelings or events) that make those people so odious to you. Reflect on how neither you nor any of us live up to Jesus’ standard for who should throw stones.
- Jesus’ followers learned from him. In Acts 15, some Christian Pharisees (quoting Genesis 17) insisted on circumcising all Gentile Christian men. Pastor Hamilton wrote of that council, “This is astounding! A council of disciples, upon hearing the testimony of Paul and Barnabas concerning the faith of the Gentiles, set aside much of the Law of Moses as no longer binding upon the church ... What happened was the recognition that parts of the Bible no longer reflected God’s will for his people.” Neither Jesus nor the apostles assumed that “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.”

Prayer: Dear God, help me learn from Jesus’ example. Although he was sinless (or rather, because he was sinless), no more merciful person ever lived. Help me grow more like him. Amen.

Jesus often let actions speak more loudly than words

March 1, 2025 John 4:7-10, 15-18, 25-26

At Jacob's Well in Samaria, Jesus met a woman who'd had five husbands. That she came at midday, not in the cool of the evening when most women drew water, strongly suggests that even the Samaritans shunned her. But Jesus did not lecture her about all of the varying divorce rules found in different parts of the Bible. Instead, he caringly offered her living water.

- Pastor Frederick Buechner wrote, "Jesus said the one supreme law is that we are to love God with all our hearts, minds, souls, and our neighbor as ourselves ... the lesser law is to be obeyed if it is consistent with the Law of Love and superseded if it isn't ... A legalistic religion like the Pharisees' is in some ways very appealing. All you have to do in any kind of ethical dilemma is look it up in the book and act accordingly. Jesus ... says all you have to do is love God and your neighbors. That may seem still more appealing until, in dilemma after dilemma, you try to figure out just how to go about doing it." What does it say that, instead of a rigid rulebook, God worked through many different writers to bring about a Bible we need to interpret? How can the Holy Spirit help you discern from Scripture the best ways of loving God and your neighbors?

Prayer: O God, master and guide, I need your help today and every day as I dig more deeply into the Bible. Equip me more and more each day to love you and my neighbors. Amen.

Family Activity: The Bible is God's great big love story for all people! This week, discover verses on love in Scripture and find Bible stories about God's love. Share God's love with your wider community using your words and actions. Remember growing love doesn't have to be practiced in big, fancy ways. Find small, yet meaningful ways to share God's love with others. Consider serving a meal to or enjoying fellowship with people unfamiliar to you. Holding a door, smiling and waving can all express God's love to someone. When we are open to God growing us through the Holy Spirit, everyday acts will help produce love for everyone. Pray daily, asking God to grow love in your heart and lives for all people.