

2 Timothy 3:1-5

You must understand this, that in the last days distressing times will come. For people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, unfeeling, implacable, slanderers, profligates, brutes, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power. Avoid them!**

Signs of the Times: Church and Morality - July 17, 2022

2 Timothy 3:1-5

Let me read some biblical rules to you from the Old Testament:

- Whoever curses father or mother shall be put to death. (Exodus 21:17)
- Love Yahweh with all your heart, soul, and might. (Deuteronomy 6:5)
- Do not wear Holy Garments made of both wool and linen. (Deuteronomy 22:11)
- Do not eat any meat with the blood still in it; neither eat any meat not fully cooked. Only when meat is cooked until it is white inside with no tinge of red or pink whatsoever insures that all blood had been removed. (Deuteronomy 12:23)
- Do not deny help to the poor. (Deuteronomy 15:7)
- Do not reap your harvest in the seventh year. (Leviticus 25:5)
- Do not oppress one another in business. (Leviticus 25:14)
- Do not take advantage of one another. (Leviticus 25:17)
- A judge must not accept bribes. (Exodus 23:8)

Now here are some rules from what Jesus said:

- Everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matthew 5:28)
- Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also (Matthew 5:39)
- Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:44)

And here are some statements Paul wrote to the early Church:

- Now it is evident that no one is reckoned as righteous before God by the law, for “the one who is righteous will live by faith.” (Galatians 3:11)
- “All things are permitted,” but not all things are beneficial. “All things are permitted,” but not all things build up. (1 Corinthians 10:23)

Wow! This is some list, isn't it?

Today as we continue our series “Signs of the Times” I want to talk about the relationship between the Church and Morality. We, Collingswood Presbyterian, are a church, a particular congregation belonging to a denomination called the Presbyterian Church USA. We operate primarily in one particular town, which is in a particular state, which is in a particular nation.

All these qualities or properties of our congregation have a direct effect on what we say and what we can do as Collingswood Presbyterian Church. The fact that we are members of the PCUSA gives our congregation considerable freedom in terms of what we can hang on our fence. We did not have to consult with the “higher ups” we just did it. Moreover our Presbyterian heritage teaches particular ways of looking at scripture, ways that I will examine in a few moments. It should be quite clear by

now that the various Christian churches and denominations do not agree on how the biblical text should be understood. Indeed, on almost every subject, you can easily find churches that either agree strongly with each other or disagree strongly with each other. Needless to say for people who are not members of a Christian Church this can be very confusing! Needless to say that for people who ARE members of a Christian Church this can also be very confusing!

Moreover, because we are located in Collingswood, New Jersey, we do have a certain comfort or assurance of knowing that the messages we post on our fence will be received positively by many of the people around us. At the very least, we are fairly certain that they will be tolerated. Unlike churches in other neighborhoods, towns, states, or nations, we are reasonably certain that nobody is going to zoom crash our online service, storm into our worship time, or threaten our building. It is certainly possible, but unlikely.

Thus we are free from restrictions from our denomination and secure in our location to advertise our views openly. The question then becomes, what do we say on our signs and more importantly why do we say what we say.

Let's be clear, the signs we have posted and the ways in which we have been witnessing to social justice over the years are hardly unique to our congregation. There are many churches who do many of the same things we do. Furthermore, outside the church community there are many organizations of all kinds who agree with us about Women's Health, LGBTQ rights, Racial Equality, and so many other things. We are far from being a voice crying in the wilderness. Rather we are one of many voices.

However, what does make us unusual in our pursuit of social justice is that as a church we explicitly claim that our authority to do what we do and say what we say comes from God as revealed in the words of the Bible. In other words, as Collingswood Presbyterian Church, we should only be posting things and taking actions that we believe are endorsed by scripture. That means we don't support particular political candidates or parties. We don't necessarily support specific policy proposals, either. For example, in the debate over climate change, it is very appropriate for us to argue from scripture that God made human beings to be the stewards or caretakers of creation. We are to actively make sure that what God has given us can be in turn given to future generations in the same or better condition than when we found it. However, it is typically not our place to specify how humans should care for the earth. We are free to point out how certain human practices have helped or hurt the planet. We can even encourage the passage of certain laws or policies to benefit the earth. However, it is not our job to tell governments or industries how they are to care for the planet. We applaud when they do what we believe is in line with scripture, we criticize if they seem to be violating God's Laws.

But that's the problem, isn't it? What are God's Laws and how do we discern God's will from the 66 or so books of the Bible? From the Bible, we are trying to somehow distill moral and ethical principles for human life. In the Old Testament, there are 613 Laws that all faithful Jews are supposed to obey.

When Jesus came, he found his fellow Jews struggling to obey the letter of the law but also frequently stated they did not understand the true spirit of the Law. As I said last week, Jesus reminded us that the Law rests on two statements: Love God, and Love your neighbor as yourself. Those statements, by the way, are both found in the Old Testament.

Paul took Jesus' teachings to another level. He stated that as Christians, we are not subject to written laws. Rather, it is our faith in Jesus that should guide us on what to do. Through faith, we will follow the written law ever more closely.

At the beginning of this sermon, I read to you various statements found in the Bible that relate to aspects of moral and ethical behavior. You may find yourself in full agreement with some, others you may find impossible, and others, like putting our children to death if they curse us, simply impossible. If we did that, I doubt few of us would have any children left! Of course, we'd have been killed, too, for cursing our parents!

Yet let's be honest, Paul's statement, "Now it is evident that no one is reckoned as righteous before God by the law, for "the one who is righteous will live by faith" is very squishy. What is righteous? How much faith? How are we to live without laws?

The beauty of living life according to an established code of laws is that it supposedly much easier to make decisions for ourselves and for our community because the directive of what we supposed to do is written down in black and white.

However, do the scriptures cover every moral and ethical situation we face as individuals or as a society? Clearly not. Debates over the past 100 years have greatly divided Christians and Churches in terms of what scripture teaches about any number of subjects. Our own Collingswood Congregation split ninety years ago over this very question. Should the Bible be taken more or less literally or do we acknowledge that the words in scripture were written at a specific time to a certain people and must therefore acknowledge new questions and new issues that may not have been thought about back then. Interpreting scripture literally has the advantage of minimizing disputes or multiple readings. However, the tendency toward being literal also minimizes readings of scripture aimed at broader society. Neither Jewish nor Christian scriptures deal very much with the moral questions related to war. Both also acknowledge the existence of slavery and confine themselves to encouraging masters to treat their slaves well. Neither calls for the outright abolition of slavery

directly. Therefore a literal reading of biblical laws is, at best, only a partial solution to how the church might address moral and ethical issues.

At the perhaps the other extreme of how the church is to teach on moral and ethical issues is adhering solely to Jesus' teaching in John 13:34, "I am giving you a new command. You must love each other, just as I have loved you." On one hand, that makes sense. Jesus was all about love and encouraging us to love God and love each other. Yet adhering to this form of biblical morality is as problematic as interpreting scripture literally. What, indeed, is love? How do we show love to each other? Is it, say, in the argument over the practice of euthanasia, more "loving" to allow a suffering person to die with dignity on their own terms? Or is it more loving to have persons to remain alive for the sake of their friends and families? Which is the more loving response?

Then, of course, I have to point out that the Church over the centuries has made horrible mistakes in moral judgement. The churches have endorsed slavery and supported wars in the name of Jesus. The Lutheran Church in Germany was coopted to support Hitler and replace Jesus with the Nazi State as god. We see not dissimilar things happening in our own country in our own time. That begs the question, can the Church claim any moral authority at all given its history of horrible mistakes? Perhaps not.

However, the passage from Paul's second letter to Timothy we read today does provide a path forward for the Church utilizing scripture as the basis for teaching morality and ethics. Paul wrote, "People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, unfeeling, implacable, slanderers, profligates, brutes, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power."

Paul, in short, observes the human condition as it is. When you look over this list, there is not one thing on it that has changed about human beings. These issues existed 2000 years ago, they existed 5000 years ago. They exist today. All of them, all of them, all of them speak not only to the way individuals behave toward each other, but they also speak to the way societies behave toward individuals and other countries as well. It even speaks to how we as individuals treat ourselves.

I assert that what Paul wrote to Timothy is more than sufficient for formulating a moral and ethical code that embraces both the Jewish understanding of the Law and Jesus' teachings about love.

Good morality, and the center of the teaching of the church is that we are to put God and others before ourselves. Think about it. Look at all the issues we face as both individuals and as a society. Can't we trace all of them back to this list? Are we not guilty as individuals? Are we not guilty as a society of all these things: being lovers of ourselves instead of God, and lovers of money, and

boasters, and being arrogant, abusive, and disobedient to our parents? Are we not as individuals and as a society ungrateful, unholy, unfeeling, implacable, slanderers, profligates, brutes, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit? Do we all not at times love pleasure rather than God, holding to the outward forms of godliness but denying its power?

Every moral or ethical question we face as individuals and as a society can be subjected to this list. Now, let me be clear, Paul's list to Timothy will not result in black or white answers. There are few moral or ethical issues which are totally one way or another. However, they all do help us answer the question: who wins and who loses from any course of action.

Friends, the issue of Church and Morality is difficult. There are no easy answers. Sorry if you thought I'd say otherwise. That is why churches from our own PCUSA to our Roman Catholic friends make the simple and straightforward declaration. "God alone is Lord of the Conscience."

Yes, here is the truth. The Church can advise you, based on centuries of tradition. Scripture can inform you because it represents thousands of years of text and commentary. We as pastors and elders can advise you with the limits of our human abilities.

But ultimately, ultimately, ultimately, every moral and ethical decision we make comes down to a genuine, authentic, spirit-filled, bible-believing, Christ-accepting conversation with your God. When such conversations happen — and they will happen to all of us — I urge you to first take advantage of all the resources God has given you: the Holy Spirit dwelling inside you, the Bible written for you, the women and men giving you spiritual direction in your life. But, finally, you need to get off by your self, close all the doors, and pray for God to answer you.

Most of the time, God's answer will echo everything that you have been taught in the past. But sometimes, God will reveal to you a course of action that only you will understand.

If and when that time comes, we as your Church family will do our best to stand with you. But there have been cases where men and women have taken stands that their churches opposed, and they later turned out to be right.

Allow us as the church to help you. Allow scripture to guide you. Listen to the Spirit speaking in you. And go, friend, with God.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.