

Hey Preacher! Sermon Series
Is the Bible True?
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“What is truth?” Pilate asks. Such a provocative question. In the musical “Jesus Christ Superstar,” Pilate asks, “What is truth? Is it a changing law? We both have truths. Are mine the same as yours?” Those are questions worth asking as we continue our summer sermon series called, “Hey Preacher!” in which we are attempting to answer questions asked by you, the congregation. Today’s question: “Is the Bible true?” Jesus says, “The truth will set you free.” But what is truth?

Let me tell you a story. It’s one you’re probably going to know. “God said to Noah, ‘I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons’ wives with you. And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every kind shall come in to you, to keep them alive.’”

Great story, isn’t it? We grew up hearing about Noah’s Ark and the animals that came two by two. Now, let me tell you another story, and let’s see what you think of this one: “Then the LORD said to Noah, ‘Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you alone are righteous before me in this generation. Take with you seven pairs of all clean animals, the male and its mate; and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and its mate; and seven pairs of the birds of the air also, male and female, to keep their kind alive on the face of all the earth.’”

OK, we know the first story. That one is in the Bible, right there in Genesis 6. So where does the second story come from? Some knock-off translation? Some creative author’s paraphrase? Believe it or not, the second story comes from...the Bible. Right there in Genesis 7, just a few verses after the first one. There are actually two different Noah’s Ark stories woven together, and they contradict each other on several points. And yet, they’re both right there in the Bible. So here’s my question for you: Which one is true? This one example alone destroys the argument that the Bible is inerrant, and I’ve got hundreds more of them. But it’s still the Bible and we are called to take it seriously. So rather than being sacrilegious, it’s responsible of us to ask the question, “Is the Bible true?”

Back to Pilate’s question. What is truth? Is it a changing law, subject to the whims and perspectives of the truth-holder? Are there universal truths, truths that are irrefutable, truths that transcend culture and time and religion? I would say “God is love” is a universal truth, but try telling that to the people who’ve been oppressed, subjugated, and killed in the name of God. So I have trouble believing that the Bible is universally true. But that doesn’t mean that it isn’t true for me. It certainly is. But that truth is evolving, changing and growing as the culture around it changes and grows.

I know a lot of people who believe we shouldn’t mess with the words of the Bible. It sounds blasphemous to some to even think about taking the words of the Bible in any way other than as universally true. But thankfully, we have a pretty powerful example of someone who said, “I know the Bible tells you this, but I think it actually means something different today.” Sounds a bit scandalous, doesn’t it? Who is this vagabond who dares to tamper with the Holy word of God? Who is this rogue theologian who shows no regard for the Good Book? He was a

woodworker from a small town in the Middle East, but you may know him more famously as Jesus Christ.

In the gospel of Matthew, during his Sermon on the Mount, five different times Jesus takes a piece of scripture and reinterprets it for his modern context. For example, in the book of Exodus, the law states, “But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.” That’s nothing less than God’s law, handed down to Charlton Heston himself! If any truth in the Bible is timeless and unchanging, it should be that.

In Matthew, Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.”

Right there, Jesus sets the precedent for reinterpreting scripture for a current context. The rule of an eye for an eye was no longer applicable in Jesus’ society, but rather than throw out the Bible as an antiquated rulebook that no longer applied, Jesus imaginatively reinterpreted God’s law so that it spoke a fresh word to his hearers. He does this dozens of times in the gospels. Because of that, the Bible remained a living document for his hearers. It continues to be true for those who read it and take it seriously.

But if the Bible speaks to each of us individually, then your truth may not be my truth based on how we read and interpret it. For example, there are some churches that believe women should not be allowed in leadership and there are scriptures to support that. Paul clearly says in scripture that women should be silent in church and hold no authority over a man. It’s right there in the Bible! But that’s not truth to me. My reason tells me that women have been given gifts by the Holy Spirit to lead and to teach. My experience tells me that women have held prominent leadership positions across culture. And my common sense tells us that if women didn’t speak and lead in the church nothing would get done! So on this issue, I have chosen to give priority to my reason and experience over what the Bible says. For me, that part of the Bible is not true.

That highlights a thorny issue that I believe is distasteful to many Christians, and that is the point that we all pick and choose which parts of the Bible are true. Every single one of us does this. We have to do so because the Bible contradicts itself, as I’ve pointed out. You can pick out a passage of scripture to support just about anything you want to believe, from handling snakes to stoning rebellious children. But all of us...ALL of us...pick and choose. We have to. There’s just too much in there, and some of it contradicts itself. We pick and choose what to believe on hundreds of issues presented in scripture, from tithing to divorce to keeping the Sabbath. We all pick and choose, and what we choose determines the type of truth we receive from the Bible.

Pastor Adam Hamilton offers an instructive metaphor here. He says we all have three buckets we use when it comes to reading scripture, and every passage goes into one of these buckets. In the first bucket are passages that reflect the timeless will of God for human beings, like the command to love God and love our neighbor. The truth in this passage for us never changes. God would never say, “Hate your neighbor.”

In the second bucket are passages that reflect God’s will in a particular time but not for all time, like some of the laws in the Old Testament. Those were God’s will for that time and place, but are no longer God’s will for us today, like God commanding the Israelites to not wear clothing of mixed fibers. These passages were true then, but not true now.

In the third bucket are passages that reflect the cultural and historical circumstances in which they were written but never reflected God's timeless will, like Paul's command for slaves to obey their masters. I don't believe God would want slavery to exist then or now. So, a passage is either a timeless truth, a "that was then, this is now" truth, or a statement written by the author that never reflected God's will. So when we read a passage, we choose which bucket they go in, and which bucket they go in determine what kind of truth those passages have for us.

Let's go back to women's roles in the church, because it is a great case study. Paul clearly says that women are to be silent in church and not to have authority over men. There are some churches that put that in the first bucket as God's timeless will. But there are other churches, ours included, who put that in the second or third bucket. I put it in the third. I don't think God ever wanted women to not play a role in church leadership. Otherwise, why would God gift them with such skills? I think that passage reflects the patriarchal society of that culture, but not God's timeless truth. When we choose to ordain women, we're not choosing between the Bible and ordaining women. We're choosing between a certain view of the Bible and ordaining women.

So, when you read the Bible, you need to figure out for yourself which bucket is best for you. When God calls the Israelites to kill the people in the surrounding nations, which bucket? When Jesus tells the story about the Good Samaritan helping the stranger, which bucket? When Jesus calls the rich young ruler to sell what he had and give it to the poor, which bucket? When Paul writes about issue like keeping the sabbath or slavery or same-sex behavior or the relationship between husbands and wives, which bucket? That's part of the work we are called to do as Christians who have been given the gift of a brain. Sure, someone else can pick your buckets for you, but then you lose the power to choose for yourself what is true and how it impacts how you live out your faith each day.

I don't claim to have it right. I might get to Heaven and God will say, "Dude, totally the wrong bucket on that one." It seems good to me to believe what I believe and live out my faith the way I choose. Doesn't mean I'm right. Doesn't mean someone who believes differently is wrong. I've studied the Bible my whole life, I take it very seriously, but I don't have the presumption to know God's heart. I learn something new every time I read it. That's why I read it. The truth of scripture continues to evolve as my faith evolves.

So, is the Bible true? Yes, it is for me. And it probably is for you, but maybe in different ways. Our concern as Christians shouldn't be proving the Bible is true, but living the truth we experience in its words. Christians have expended a lot of energy and shed a lot of blood convincing people the Bible is true. I think we'd be better servants if we focused on showing people the Bible is true for us by living out what we've learned there. If we make that our truth, then the truth will indeed set us free to be God's people in this world.