

Half-Truths: 4. God Said It and That Settles It
2 Timothy 3:14-17
January 27, 2019
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This is our final Sunday in a series called Half-Truths. We all say things and do things based on assumptions. When we don't know what to say, we sometimes say what sounds true. Like "everything happens for a reason" or "God helps those who help themselves" or "God won't give you more than you can handle." And because it sounds true, we keep saying it. It seems reasonable until we look a little deeper and realize what we said doesn't really mean what we thought it did. And this morning, I'd like us to consider a statement that you may have heard. It's reflected in this billboard. **God said it, I believe it, that settles it.** The middle line is crossed out as if to say, you don't even need to believe it. God said it, and that settles it.

In our home, we have a bulletin board on the wall next to our kitchen table. And when our children were living with us, we had dinner together most nights and often during the meal someone would make a comment that seemed worth remembering and so I'd write it on a slip of paper and pin it to the bulletin board. Like the evening one of our daughters said, "I don't want a car." That seemed worth remembering, so I wrote it down, put her name on it, and pinned it to the bulletin board. Somehow, that slip of paper disappear. Or the evening, Amanda said, "Dad knows more than I do." Never mind that the quote was taken out of context. Or the meal, when Amanda didn't want to get involved in a discussion I was having and she said, "Dad's the boss." I wrote that one down too. Until this moment, I've never dared say that out loud – and I didn't need to. I could just point to the bulletin board. You said it, that settles it! As long as you didn't pay attention to the entire conversation, you might assume that's how things work in our home – and you would be wrong!

When it comes to the Bible, we can find a lot of statements that seem to say one thing but only because the verse is taken out of context. In fact, you could probably use the Bible to prove almost anything, but that's not why we have the Bible. I could take certain verses from the Bible and use them this morning to preach about how God's will for us is to have multiple wives. Many of the early patriarchs of the faith had multiple wives and God did not condemn them but blessed them for that practice. It says so in the Bible, I believe the Bible, so that settles it. Or in Deuteronomy 21, the Bible tells us that if teenagers talk back to their parents they are to be stoned to death. How many of us would say: It's in the Bible, God says it, that settles it. You might not believe it now but during my teenaged years, I had long hair – so long that I had to get it cut twice before my mother would pay for my senior class pictures. I told her that in Leviticus 19:27 God says a man must not cut his hair or clip the ends of his beard. So why do I need to get my hair cut? And do you know what she said, because I said so! End of conversation. And sometimes, that's how the Bible gets used – God says it; that settles it – end of conversation.

In the 1880s there were preachers who used a passage of scripture for just that reason. **The latrines must be outside the camp. You will use them there, outside the camp. Carry a shovel with the rest of your gear; once you have relieved yourself, use it to dig a hole, then refill it, covering your excrement.** The 1880s were a time when indoor plumbing was introduced and some felt it was not proper for the bathroom and what people do in bathrooms to be done inside God's house. God says it, I believe it, that settles it. It's not just the Old Testament, we can find passages in the New Testament that no longer make sense to us. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul writes that if women worship or pray without their heads veiled, their heads should be shaved. The Bible says and that settles it?

Christian theology is grounded in scripture, but we take the totality of the Bible, not selected verses, and then we prayerfully, thoughtfully allow the Holy Spirit to shape our understanding. It would be easier if the Bible was a theology textbook. I have one of those that I keep by my desk at home. It is laid out very clearly, beginning with an understanding of God, the Trinity, the nature and work of Jesus... And if you are having trouble sleeping at night, here's book for you. I use this book often. It helps me consider a broad range of Christian thought and in the process helps me to clarify my beliefs. But the Bible is not a theology textbook. It is a storybook – not stories like fairy tale stories, but stories out of the lives and history of people through the ages who have wrestled to make sense of their relationship with God. These are stories that contain truth for our lives, but that truth is often below the surface.

Let's look at what Paul was saying in a letter to his young assistant, Timothy. **Every scripture is inspired by God** I believe that. But what does Paul mean when he says, "every scripture"? Paul doesn't tell us exactly, but at the time Paul wrote this letter, the only written scriptures were scrolls that contained some of the books we now have in the Old Testament. And in the first century, even the Jews could not agree which scrolls to include. The Sadducees only included the first five books. Others included the writings and prophets. The Jews in Alexandria has one set of scrolls in Greek, and the Jews in Jerusalem had another set in Hebrew. Paul draws from the Greek texts in Alexandria. Today, Roman Catholics have a different set than Protestants because Catholics drew from the Greek texts in Alexandria and the Protestants drew from what was listed in Jerusalem. And then the Orthodox Christians have different set. So what is Paul referring to? And when he says, "scripture" (the Greek word means literally "writings"), so does he mean every word? It isn't clear.

Paul says, **Every scripture is inspired by God...** The English word is inspired but the Greek word written by Paul is *theopneustos* – a word that scholars think Paul made up because it only appears this one place. It's a combination of two words – "theo" which means God and "pneustos" which means breathed. In other words, "God-breathed". Paul is using a metaphor but what does Paul mean? It's not clear which is why Christians have different interpretations. Does this mean God planted the thoughts in the minds of those who wrote the Scriptures, or maybe after they were written God breathed life into them so when they are read we can sense God speaking to us.

And then Paul says: **...and is 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.** I think that's his point. The sacred texts – God breathes on them in some way and that makes them useful to us. But we still have to interpret what we read. Every week when I sit down to begin work on Sunday's message, I pray: God, you know my life and the people who will hear this. Help me to hear what you want me to hear." And then I spend an entire day reading and studying and often I fill an entire notepad with thoughts that come to me, and then I'll go for a long walk or to the treadmill or just sit in silence. Speak, Lord, your servant is listening. And sometimes, I feel this nudge and other times, there's nothing – as if God is saying, do the best you can to figure this out. And some Sundays some of you tell me I hit the mark and other Sundays – it's just a lot of hot air. And then there are Sundays when someone will come to me after worship to comment on what they heard and what they heard wasn't anything I said. I think it was the Holy Spirit speaking to you – which is why we provide a space in the bulletin to take a few notes. But what you never hear me say is God told me to tell you, because I don't know for sure.

Bible says it, so we take it seriously, and we reflect on it in light of Jesus and what he taught and how he lived. Even Jesus interpreted Scripture. In Matthew 5, he quotes the Hebrew Scriptures:

You have heard that it was said, you must love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who harass you so that you will be acting as children of your Father who is in heaven. So when there is something in scripture that will hurt someone or tear someone down, I stop and ask What Would Jesus Do – what is God saying in light of what I see in Jesus and hear him teaching. John tells us that Jesus is the Word made flesh. Jesus is the only inerrant and infallible word of God. God put his message in the flesh of Jesus. And when I read something that doesn't line up with Jesus, I'm going to pick Jesus. It's like this COLANDER. This morning I used it to wash blueberries for my breakfast. The blueberries stayed but other particles were washed away. And when I read something that doesn't line up with Jesus, it flows through. It doesn't mean it's not true, it means I have to look deeper and ask questions.

So when I read in the Law if a priest's daughter becomes a prostitute, she is to be bound and burned alive by her father. I can't imagine anything that would cause me to do that. But then I read what Jesus does when a prostitute comes to him and weeps at his feet. He shows her grace and points her to God. I don't know what to do with what the Law says, but I know Jesus teaches me how to treat others – even a prostitute. Or we read in the Old Testament where God commands the killing of thousands of people, but then I read how Jesus says, Love your enemies and pray for those who harass you. Which is God's word for me? I'm going with Jesus. Or in Matthew 22, Jesus says "All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands:" Love God and Love your neighbor

A few years ago, I met with a family to prepare for their mother's funeral. They brought their mother's Bible with them, thinking that might help us find the right words to honor her life. I'll never forget her Bible was well worn, the binding barely holding the pages in place, the leather cover barely recognizable. Verses had been underlined and notes written in the margin. It was easy to find the scripture that meant the most to her, but in case there was any question she'd written her favorite passage on a notecard stuffed inside the Bible. Then as I took notes, her children began to describe this woman who had brought them into the world and loved them throughout their lives. They wondered aloud how she could be this amazing person that they described. And I had the answer. It was this well-worn Bible that had been her guide and inspiration throughout her life.

There is no other book like the Bible. I read from it every morning. I memorize verses from it, and I attempted to live by it, and it is through this book that I find God speaking to me. I am a better husband, a better father, and a better pastor because of this book. And my hope and prayer for each of you is that you will discover as I have the wonderful words of life.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of January 27, 2019

Weekly Prayer: O God, Master and Guide, we need your help today and every day as we dig more deeply into the Bible. Equip us each day to love you and our neighbors. Help us learn from Jesus' example and grow ever more like you, so that we will love and serve you with our lives. Amen.

Monday, January 28

Scripture: 2 Timothy 2:14-15, 3:15-17

Remind them of these things and warn them in the sight of God not to engage in battles over words that aren't helpful and only destroy those who hear them. Make an effort to present

yourself to God as a tried-and-true worker, who doesn't need to be ashamed but is one who interprets the message of truth correctly.

Since childhood you have known the holy scriptures that help you to be wise in a way that leads to salvation through faith that is in Christ Jesus. Every scripture is inspired by God and is 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.

Observation: “God said it, I believe it, that settles it” rightly says Scripture is key for spiritual growth. Paul told Timothy that 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.

Application: 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.

Tuesday, January 29

Scripture: John 1:14-18; Hebrews 1:1-3

The Word became flesh and made his home among us. We have seen his glory, glory like that of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. John testified about him, crying out, "This is the one of whom I said, 'He who comes after me is greater than me because he existed before me.'" From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace; as the Law was given through Moses, so grace and truth came into being through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. God the only Son, who is at the Father's side, has made God known.

In the past, God spoke through the prophets to our ancestors in many times and many ways. In these final days, though, he spoke to us through a Son. God made his Son the heir of everything and created the world through him. The Son is the light of God's glory and the imprint of God's being. He maintains everything with his powerful message. After he carried out the cleansing of people from their sins, he sat down at the right side of the highest majesty.

Observation: 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.

Application: Sometimes we read the Bible as a set of free-standing verses, all equally true. 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.

Wednesday, January 30

Scripture: Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28, 38-40, 43-45

"You have heard that it was said to those who lived long ago, don't commit murder, and all who commit murder will be in danger of judgment. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with their brother or sister will be in danger of judgment. If they say to their brother or sister, 'You idiot,' they will be in danger of being condemned by the governing council. And if they say, 'You fool,' they will be in danger of fiery hell.

"You have heard that it was said, Don't commit adultery. But I say to you that every man who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery in his heart.

"You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you that you must not oppose those who want to hurt you. If people slap you on your right cheek, you must turn the left cheek to them as well. When they wish to haul you to court and take your shirt, let them have your coat too.

"You have heard that it was said, You must love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who harass you so that you will be acting as children of your Father who is in heaven. He makes the sun rise on both the evil and the good and sends rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous.

Observation: British theologian, Lesslie 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.

Application: 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?

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.

Thursday, January 31

Scripture: Deuteronomy 21:18-21; Luke 15:11-24

Now if someone has a consistently stubborn and rebellious child, who refuses to listen to their father and mother—even when the parents discipline him, he won't listen to them—the father

and mother will take the son before the elders of that city at its gates. Then they will inform the city's elders: "This son of ours is consistently stubborn and rebellious, refusing to listen to us. What's more, he's wild and a drunkard." Then all the people of that town will stone him until he dies. Remove such evil from your community! All Israel will hear about this and be afraid.

Jesus said, "A certain man had two sons. The younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the inheritance.' Then the father divided his estate between them. Soon afterward, the younger son gathered everything together and took a trip to a land far away. There, he wasted his wealth through extravagant living. "When he had used up his resources, a severe food shortage arose in that country and he began to be in need. He hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. He longed to eat his fill from what the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have more than enough food, but I'm starving to death! I will get up and go to my father, and say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son. Take me on as one of your hired hands." 'So he got up and went to his father. "While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. His father ran to him, hugged him, and kissed him. Then his son said, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quickly, bring out the best robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet! Fetch the fattened calf and slaughter it. We must celebrate with feasting because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life! He was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

Observation: The reading from Deuteronomy is the type of passage we could agree no longer applies literally to our time and place, and yet there have been times when this very passage was used to contest efforts to put indoor plumbing in church buildings. Today, most would agree this passage does not capture God's will for us. When Jesus told a story about a rebellious son, he pictured God not as wanting to remove evil, but running down the road to embrace just such a son and welcome him home.

Application: 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 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.

Friday, February 1

Scripture: Leviticus 20:10, 21:9; John 8:2-11

If a man commits adultery with a married woman, committing adultery with a neighbor's wife, both the adulterer and the adulteress must be executed.

If the daughter of a priest defiles herself by being promiscuous, she defiles her father. She must be burned with fire.

Early in the morning he returned to the temple. All the people gathered around him, and he sat down and taught them. The legal experts and Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery.

Placing her in the center of the group, they said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of committing adultery. In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone women like this. What do you say?" They said this to test him, because they wanted a reason to bring an accusation against him. Jesus bent down and wrote on the ground with his finger. They continued to question him, so he stood up and replied, "Whoever hasn't sinned should throw the first stone." Bending down again, he wrote on the ground. Those who heard him went away, one by one, beginning with the elders. Finally, only Jesus and the woman were left in the middle of the crowd. Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Is there no one to condemn you?" She said, "No one, sir." Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on, don't sin anymore."

Observation: The Pharisees quoted Scripture, almost correctly, in a "God says so" kind of 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 (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.

Application: 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.

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.

Saturday, February 2

Scripture: John 4:7-10, 15-18, 25-26

A Samaritan woman came to the well to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me some water to drink." His disciples had gone into the city to buy him some food. The Samaritan woman asked, "Why do you, a Jewish man, ask for something to drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" (Jews and Samaritans didn't associate with each other.) Jesus responded, "If you recognized God's gift and who is saying to you, 'Give me some water to drink,' you would be asking him and he would give you living water."

The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will never be thirsty and will never need to come here to draw water!" Jesus said to her, "Go, get your husband, and come back here." The woman replied, "I don't have a husband." "You are right to say, 'I don't have a husband,'" Jesus answered. "You've had five husbands, and the man you are with now isn't your husband. You've spoken the truth."

The woman said, "I know that the Messiah is coming, the one who is called the Christ. When he comes, he will teach everything to us." Jesus said to her, "I Am—the one who speaks with you."

Observation: 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.

Application: Theologian 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.