

## By What Standard?

Turn to Matthew 15:1-8. While you are turning there...

- I'd like to tell you a true story about a United Methodist youth group meeting in spring/summer of 1973 in which Steve and I got into some trouble with the adult leaders and our peers...
  - The topic was abortion. The Roe vs. Wade decision in the Supreme Court which legalized abortion across the United States had been handed down earlier that year, on January 22 of 1973. It was a hot topic in the nation at the time.
  - A major revival had swept through Millersport in the spring of the previous year. It was during that revival that I committed my life to Jesus.
  - Youth group meetings in the aftermath were very well attended. At times as many as 50 or more young people would come to the Sunday evening meetings. Remember, this was in the days before the Internet and social media, so we had to get together face-to-face to share ideas!
  - This particular evening, the adult leaders entertained everyone's opinions about this controversial issue while offering no guidance or commentary.
  - The views on abortion were wide ranging, and most of them centered on practicalities around unwanted pregnancy: will the child be brought up in a loving home, will the child be born into poverty, is the father involved, is the mother too young, is the fetus even a human, it's just a clump of cells, and so on.
  - I recall being agitated in my spirit, and I could sense that Steve was also.
  - We took our turns. Back-to-back, both of us expressed what the Bible had to say...that a fetus in the womb is a human from the point of conception. I quoted the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment "Thou shall not murder," and Steve, I think, referenced the verses from Psalm 139 where David, the Psalmist, prayed:

*<sup>13</sup> For you formed my inward parts;  
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.*

*<sup>14</sup> I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well.*

*<sup>15</sup> My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret,  
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.*

*<sup>16</sup> Your eyes saw my unformed substance;  
in your book were written, every one of them,  
the days that were formed for me,  
when as yet there was none of them. (Psalm 139:13-16)*

- There was an uncomfortable silence, then the backlash began. One by one, our peers spoke up, saying things like "Why do you guys always have to bring up the Bible?" or "The Bible is so outdated. What it says doesn't matter." I recall one

person in particular who said “We’re tired of hearing about the Bible. It’s crammed down our throats during church and Sunday School. Youth group is a place where we can come and talk about things without always having to hear about the Bible.”

- The leaders let it go on for a while, then they closed the discussion. I was shocked, hurt, and angry. I remember Steve sitting by himself in his car after the meeting just so he could pray and process things alone.
- I’m not pretending that we were always diplomatic in our approach. In fact, as I’ve reflected on the event over the years, I’m pretty sure Steve and I may have used a hatchet rather than a surgical knife to “rightly divide the word of truth” in front of the group.
- But it launched us into a search for a church or a body of believers where the Word of God was taught and cherished...and the rest is history from there.
- Obviously, things have not changed much. From 1973 until now, the problem of ignoring or reinterpreting Scripture in relation to the issues of our day is more pronounced than ever.

Ok, with that as a backdrop, let’s read together Matthew 15:1-8:

***1 Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, 2 “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.” 3 He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? 4 For God commanded, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ 5 But you say, ‘If anyone tells his father or his mother, “What you would have gained from me is given to God,” 6 he need not honor his father.’ So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. 7 You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said:***

***8 “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; 9 in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” (Matthew 15:1-8)***

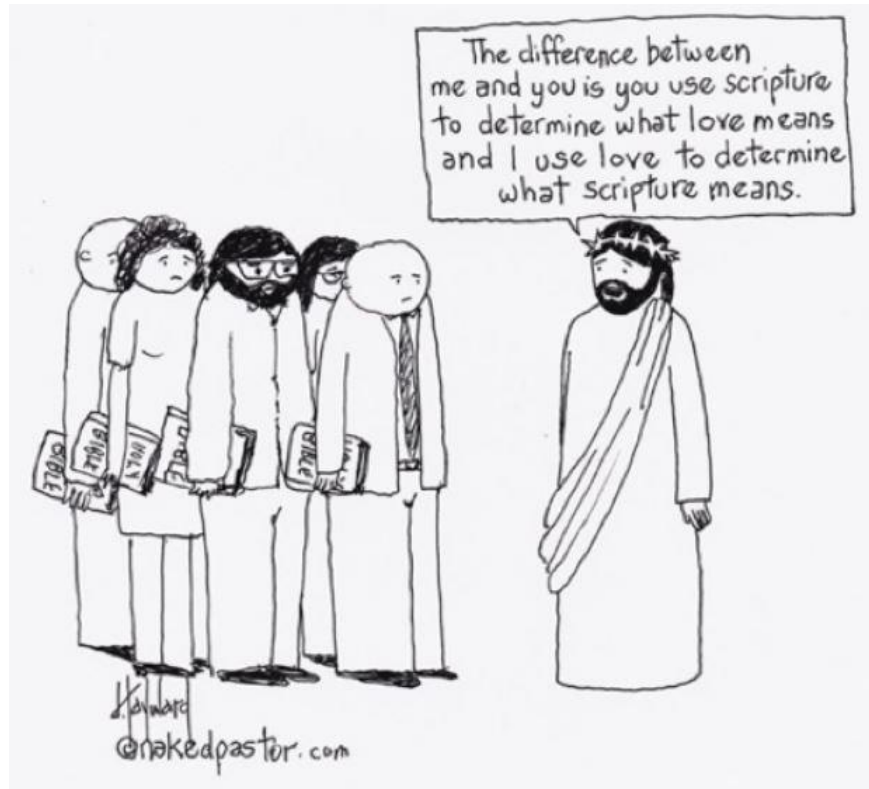
- In the Old Covenant Levitical code, which had been given by God through Moses, there were rituals around how the priests should handle the temple sacrifices. They were to wash themselves and the sacrifices in a rigidly prescribed manner before offering them on the altar for the sins of the people.
- For whatever reason, over the centuries, unrighteous Pharisees had transferred these Levitical requirements to the congregation, making the keeping of the law so rigid that few could bear the weight of their obligations. This had the effect of giving the Pharisees power since they could keep the commoners under their thumbs. They could threaten people with excommunication or even prison sentences for not following their man-made laws exactly. They could also manipulate the people for their own financial benefit.

- Jesus saw through this charade. He called the Pharisees “hypocrites” because they frequently didn’t follow their own rules. Worse than that, they elevated their man-made code above the commandments given by God. Their standards mattered more than the standards God made clear in the law handed down through Moses.
- Jesus condemned this behavior. It’s why the Pharisees hated him and why the downtrodden common folk loved him.
- Jesus really brings it home when he confronts the Pharisees regarding their circumventing the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment about honoring your father and mother. The Pharisees had made a rule that a person could get around the requirement to care for their elderly parents by claiming that the financial support they would otherwise give to their parents was being donated to “God” instead.
- Now, who do you supposed benefitted from this unrighteous rule? It let selfish young adults keep a lot of their own earnings instead of supporting their parents and, since God wasn’t walking around taking up collections, it let the religious leaders benefit from the extra donations personally. They were robbing the temple treasuries of this supplemental money they were bringing in.
- Jesus’ confrontation of the Pharisees was right on. He saw through their hypocrisy, and he quoted Isaiah to back up his charges:

***“This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” (Matthew 15:8-9, quoting Isaiah 29:13)***

- The title of this message is “By What Standard?” When a person claims that something is right or wrong, whether it is regarding abortion, religious traditions, social justice, race, sexual mores, marriage...what is their basis for making the claim? What is the standard are they using? Are they pulling these rules out of thin air, are they basing it on majority opinion, or is there an eternal, unchanging source of truth that exists “out there?”
- As we have seen in the example of the unrighteous Pharisees making unjust rules, and in my personal example of my high school friends expressing their opinions about abortion, there is no shortage of rule-making that finds its source in the hearts of selfish humans, even among people who claim to be followers of Jesus.
- John Calvin, the reformer, famously said “The human heart is an idol-making factory.” In other words, we are constantly creating little gods to worship.
- The Pharisees idolized money, prestige, and power, so they instituted rules (that had the appearance of godliness, that allowed them to gain money, prestige, and power illegitimately. When people ignore the commandments against adultery and murder, they legitimize and even legalize abortion to deal with the results of their sinful lust or their misplaced loyalties.

I’d like to show you an illustration to bring this discussion right into the present day.



- This meme made its way around Facebook and other social media sites last year (describe the picture and read the caption). It appeared in my news feed several times, and each time people commented positively, saying things like “Yes, exactly! Everything should be interpreted through the eyes of love!” or “If only more people in our churches would adopt this view.” A non-Christian Facebook friend even posted this on his Facebook page, as if to say “You Christians had better shape up!”
- The first time I saw this meme, it was posted on a pastor’s page in Facebook with a positive comment from him. Frankly, I was shocked.
- Can you see the problem with the sentiment behind this illustration? Think about it:
  - First of all, Jesus Christ is God incarnate, the living Word of God, and the author of our faith. He doesn’t need any higher principle to determine what scripture means.
  - According to the meme, which has priority: love or scripture?
  - What is the standard? Who defines “love?” If there ever was a word that has been more used and abused in our culture, it is the word “love.”
  - Practically every kind of sexual behavior has been legitimized by calling it “love.” I’ll refrain from reciting a list of these behaviors. Let’s just suffice it to say that anything goes in our culture today.
  - “Love” has been cited as the reason behind higher and higher taxes, ignoring the fact that, at some point taxation turns into pure theft, breaking the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment “Thou shall not steal.”

- Personally, I find this illustration blasphemous. It characterizes Jesus as saying there is a standard higher than God's word. It indicates that people who condemn behaviors that the Bible condemns are unloving and not Christ-like.
- I'll read, again, the words from Isaiah Jesus quoted to the unrighteous Pharisees: ***"This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."***
- This illustration pretends to honor Jesus. But, truthfully, it subjugates Jesus and God's word to an arbitrary standard of "love" that can be defined by people in any way they choose.
- Think about some of the hot issues in our nation today. The situation we face in our culture is a boiling cauldron of arbitrary standards imposed by people who have little regard for the standards revealed by God in his word. Conflicts over racial and social justice, poverty, equality between classes, races, and genders, and basic human liberties are threatening to blow our republic to smithereens.
- The Bible is not at all silent on these concerns. Not at all! Consider again the illustration of Jesus rebuking the church people. Let's trade out a couple different words in the quote: **justice, equality**...can you see that we, as God-fearing people, cannot fall into the trap of letting others arbitrarily define the issues, then letting them reinterpret the truths in scripture based on their presuppositions?
- You might say, "But, Mark, this is not a theocracy. We can't force Christianity or our Christian views on people who aren't sympathetic to them. Requiring people to follow Biblical guidelines isn't going to solve anything."
- Look, I understand that laws don't change people's hearts. But someone's morality reigns supreme when crafting legislation. All rule-making is someone or some group "forcing" their morality on the rest of us. We, as believers, should work to influence our neighbors, we should vote for godly leaders and principles, and some of us might even serve in a public office to see that Biblical standards are honored whenever possible.
- The church needs to shine the light to a wayward culture by, above everything else, holding up God's standards as clarified in His word as the final arbiter of right and wrong. We have these problems because, over time, we've caved to man-made standards and we've forgotten the standards revealed in God's word.
- **Above every human reason, every opinion, or every practical outcome, a behavior, attitude, or belief is right or wrong, first and foremost, because God says it is right or wrong in His word.**
- Here is another meme I saw recently, and I agree with the sentiment it expresses:

**If your entire theology is "God is Love" and "Do not Judge", then you don't have Christianity; you have Oprah.**

- I know this sounds negative and a bit critical. But, sadly, this expresses the depth of belief many modern day Christians possess. Their surface-deep knowledge of the Old and New Testaments has caused them to cave to the pressures that our godless culture has pressed upon them.
- We often shake our heads over the degradation we see all around us. There are many causes, but right there, at the top, is the fact that the church has lost its prophetic voice.
- To close, listen to this exhortation given by the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 4:11-16. Paul is talking to the church about our coming to maturity under the various ministries God has instituted:

***11 And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, 14 so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. 15 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Ephesians 4:11-16)***

God help us as we seek to honor Him and His word above all things! Let's pray...

Let me leave you with these words from Isaiah 66:1-2:

***Thus says the Lord:***

***"Heaven is my throne,  
and the earth is my footstool;  
what is the house that you would build for me,  
and what is the place of my rest?  
All these things my hand has made,  
and so all these things came to be,***

***declares the Lord.***

***But this is the one to whom I will look:  
he who is humble and contrite in spirit  
and trembles at my word.”***

**Other Resources:**

- Quote by John Chrysostom, an early Church Father who lived in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, in his Homily 33 on the Acts of the Apostles:

*Along comes an unbeliever and says, “I want to become a Christian, but I don’t know which body of believers to join. There’s so much quarreling among you, so many different groups, so much confusion. Which doctrine shall I choose?”*

*How shall we answer him? “Each of you,” he says, “claims to speak the truth.” Quite so! But that is in our favor. For if we told you to be persuaded by arguments, you might well be perplexed. However, if we ask you to believe the Scriptures, and if the Scriptures are plain and true, the decision is easy for you. Whoever agrees with Scripture, he is the Christian; whoever fights against the Scripture, he is far from the rule of belief.”*

- An excellent video interview in which Voddie Baucham demonstrates how to use biblical principles to address a hot issue in our culture: “Is Critical Race Theory Leading to Catastrophe in the Church? A Conversation with Voddie Baucham”  
<https://youtu.be/kBISRjN5Sto>