

How Then Shall We Live? : Valuing Life
By Jason Huff
Psalms 139:1-18, Jeremiah 1:1,4-10, Matthew 5:21-24,38-48

This week's final Scripture reading comes from Matthew 5:21-24 and 38-48. Listen now to God's Word. "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift...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 someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

There's an old saying that everybody knows – so old that nobody knows who said it first. There are two things you should never talk about in polite company – politics and religion. Many of us are passionate about our politics and our faith, and it's wise to tread lightly and humbly on these two subjects. Yet we find that we fear discussing religion anywhere, even in church. Jesus spoke about God all the time everywhere without regard for who He might offend, and He wound up crucified by the religious leaders of His day. No wonder we're nervous!

But as Jesus' disciples, we are not allowed to obey only those things that are comfortable for us. We are obligated to study the whole of Scripture and, with the Holy Spirit's help and guidance, to live it out. That means that sometimes we will get very uncomfortable because God doesn't fit into a neat package. He breaks down our barriers and offends our sensibilities no matter our politics or our theological persuasions.

When I arrived at Church of the Covenant almost three years ago, I was told the church needed time to heal. In the previous three years, some preaching was from the far left of the political spectrum and some from the far right. There was something to offend everyone. Some wouldn't invite their friends for fear that they would be aghast at something said. Up until now, I have worked to make us a more biblically literate congregation. We studied through the whole of Luke and part of Acts. We learned God's call to share our faith, and we read through the story of Scripture together. While there was plenty of controversial material, I steered clear from thorny subjects. But as we move to studying the ethics and morality of the Bible, we must broach some difficult topics. As a pastor, it would be neglectful of me if I didn't talk about them directly. As a congregation, we must confront the issues that face us outside this building.

Today, I'm going to talk about the value of life from a biblical perspective. This is a discussion that takes us into subject areas that will be difficult for some of us. But before we do that, I want to ask us all to do something. I want us to put down our labels. If you think of yourself as pro-life or pro-choice, I'm going to ask you for the next fifteen minutes or so to set that aside. Unless we do that, we'll only be able to see Scripture through whatever viewpoint we hold. We talked a couple of weeks ago about why Scripture is our authority, and so I want us to try and get a straightforward perspective on what the Bible tells us.

When we read the Bible cover to cover, we get a clear picture that God is the giver of life, the creator of life, and as such life must be respected and valued. From the very first chapter of Genesis, we see God's handiwork in making us. While God calls His initial creation "good," only after God creates human beings does He say that His creation is "very good." We are the pinnacle of His work. We are given immense value. And Scripture tells us that, unlike anything else in God's creation, we are the image bearers of God.

Adam and Eve had no laws over them but one. They were warned that if they disobeyed God, death would be the consequence. The Hebrew is emphatic: literally, it says that if they ate the fruit from two certain trees in the Garden of Eden, "dying you will die." God's words indicate immediacy. Yet God so loves His creation that when they sin, they do not die on the spot. Though they have decided to follow their own desires rather than God, God gives them an amazingly long lifespan. God honors life by holding back death.

In Genesis 4, we have the first murder – Cain kills his brother Abel out of what appears to be jealousy. God confronts Cain about it and said, "Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground." God declares that Cain is cursed; the ground no longer yields crops from him due to his taking of life – even though at this time no official laws even existed. Life is so sacred that we don't need a law for us to know that taking a life goes against God's intentions.

As the biblical story continues, we see God give the Law to the Israelites through Moses. Respect for one another and for life in general is built into the system. The Law teaches that we are to worship God alone and to respect Him, and then to show honor to one's parents. We honor one another not only by not murdering one another, but respecting each other's spouses, each other's property, and so on. We honor one another's lives as sacred in the eyes of God.

This was stunningly countercultural in the ancient near east. The cultures surrounding Israel were bloodthirsty. They had no respect for life. They practiced child sacrifice as a part of their religious rituals. They violently punished any offense. Remember how common thieves were hung on the crosses beside Jesus? That was not uncommon for even a simple offense. Vengeance and blood feuds reigned. Slaves were not only seen as property, they were disposable.

In comparison, Israelite law shows a respect for the lives of all persons. In Israelite society, if a man struck his slave and he died, the man was guilty of murder. If the slave was disabled in any way, he was to be set free as compensation. For a slave to have any rights was unheard of in the neighboring cultures. We also see rights established for the accused. If someone was killed, the accused could flee to a specific town where they would be unharmed until a trial. No one faced the death penalty without multiple corroborating witnesses.

If the Scriptures set up a fundamental respect for life, they are also very clear about when that life starts. When God speaks to Jeremiah as we heard this morning, God tells him that He knew him before He even formed him in the womb. God's plans for Jeremiah were not made up on-the-fly; instead, God created Jeremiah to be His prophet. The Psalmist in this morning's reading gives God credit for knitting him together; he states there is no place he can go where God is not there. Nothing is hidden to God, and that includes life in the womb. God's law acknowledges this. In Exodus 21, we have a law stating that if a woman is pregnant and is struck, if the baby dies, the man who struck her is guilty of bloodshed.

All human life is precious to God and protected by God. As we say that, we need to remember that God was not just about preserving life for the sake of life. He desires protections for all those who are weak or abandoned in society. James 1:27 tells us, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." In Acts 6, we see where the church actively took care of the widows and those who were marginalized. And in Matthew, Jesus taught that at the end of this age, we would be judged on whether or not we showed compassion and mercy to those He called "the least of these my brethren." That included the sick, the imprisoned, the poor and destitute. God calls for us to live out a culture of life in Christian community.

If we've established that Scripture teaches us to respect all life, especially the lives of the weak and helpless, the second point we must establish is that Scripture shows us Christian community is not about rendering final judgment on others but on showing each and every person we meet compassion in the midst of life's messiness. Our passage from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount this morning may not at first seem to fit into this discussion, but it does.

Jesus told us that God's judgment will come not only on the one who commits murder but the one who is angry at his brother. Jesus tells us that God's judgment comes on us for the words we say. Jesus taught that we will be judged by God not only for adultery but for lust. We are all guilty. We all need forgiveness. And God uses failed people, weak people, sinful people. Through His Son's sacrifice He redeems and restores them and makes them His own. Peter denied Christ three times and Paul once helped condemn Christians to death. They are living proof that God can and will use anyone, even those who have committed significant sins. If Jesus would not condemn to death a woman caught in adultery but simply said, "Go and sin no more," we must also drop our stones and offer forgiveness.

As we discussed last week, Christians are called to be a community of grace to the world around us, and this is an opportunity. We must show love and compassion to the young women who find themselves pregnant and alone and uncertain where to turn. As a Christian community, we must show love and compassion to the men involved who have been taught by our society to avoid responsibility and the moral road. We must show love and compassion to those who have not yet chosen what to do and to those who have already chosen. No one stands outside the realm of God's grace and compassion and mercy.

I want to tell you the story about a woman we met in Kentucky. She was at one time a model in LA. She was living “the high life.” She got involved with drugs and the social scene. She didn't have just one abortion but two. She was in a miserable place when God got a hold of her and changed her life. She was able to realize God's never-ending love and forgiveness that He extended to her. She now is married with three sons...and she is a pastor's wife. The vast majority of people would never ever know. But God is using her back in LA to reach those who are now where she once was. God's grace has shown itself faithful. Let us not be quick to judge but quick to extend mercy, since we have been recipients of God's mercy ourselves.

That leads me to our final point: we are called as God's community to get involved in ways that really make a difference. Jesus said in this morning's reading that we are to help the person we least want to help. Jesus mentioned how if someone demanded you go one mile with them, go two. That was a reference to Roman law. A centurion by law could demand that any subject of the Roman Empire carry his belongings or a message up to a mile, but not two. Jesus said to show grace beyond what the law required. Jesus says that if someone wants your cloak, give them your tunic as well – again, something that the law forbid, but Jesus wanted us to go beyond the letter of the law to show grace. Pray for those who persecute you, love those who are unrighteous...these are the things Jesus said prove we truly love God. We get involved in the lives of the least, the last, and the lost and we show love to all.

The Christian community must look out for the least, the last, and the lost because society has abandoned them. Recent statistics out of New York City are stunning. In our country, 20% of pregnancies are ended...but in NYC, it's 40%, and among African-American pregnancies, it's 60%. These statistics are bringing Republicans and Democrats together because while it may be safe and legal, no one can say abortion is rare. African-American leaders see it as an issue of social justice. As Michael Faulkner, an African-American pastor in Harlem, put it, abortion is “the leading cause of death among African-Americans.” This is a tragedy for all involved – the women who feel they have no real choice, the men who have not been trained to respond responsibly, and our society which will never benefit from the gifts of those lives lost.

For this tragedy to end, we must value life in action and not just thought. God does not call on us to form a personal opinion and leave it at that. He does not give us that choice. Jesus condemned the Pharisees for burdening the people with laws without being willing to help them live them out. Jesus lived out forgiveness even unto death, and we are called to do the same.

Each new life brings with it consequences. Are we willing to place our money and our lives on the line to back up our beliefs? The early church did. In the Roman era, unwanted children were left out in the elements to die. Christians were well known for rescuing and raising those children because of their respect for life. We too have a responsibility to be part of the solution. Some of us may be called to adopt a young child, to give up those years and dollars, to show that life is precious. Others might be called to support a single mother who needs child care and a job and food on the table. Still others might support a child through Compassion International so that they might have a chance at a better life. I don't know how God will touch you to act, but when He does, I urge you to follow through. God hasn't given us all the same resources or skills or abilities, but He has called on us to show that as Christians, we value all human life.

We also have a responsibility to show love and care to all those who have gone through with an abortion. Regardless of our opinions on its morality, abortion is legal in this country and will likely continue to be so, and all of us need to help deal with the ramifications of that fact. A recent survey found that over 90% of women who have had an abortion eventually regret that decision, even if they feel that the decision was appropriate or necessary at the time. Some of us are called to sit beside these women and counsel them, not to condemn them but to show them the love of God that goes beyond any choice they have made. If we feel unable or unqualified to help in this way, we may be called to help pay for solid Christian counseling many need to move beyond the grief and guilt they feel so that they can realize that God still cares about them.

Moving beyond those positions, we must consider how we as the church, the body of believers in Jesus Christ, can stand in society against the tide that devalues life across the board. We need to be willing, where we are able, with our young men and women, our children and grandchildren, neighbors and nieces and nephews, to promote a culture that values people and values life. We are called to teach young women that they are loved and valued by God – that because of that love, they do not need to give in to the urgings of a boyfriend but can find self-respect through their Creator. We are called to teach young men how to be men – not to live in the perpetual adolescence and hedonism our culture sells to teenage boys but to honor women and treat them as equals. It is our responsibility to tell the younger generations that because of the love of God, no matter what mistakes they've made along the way, they can find redemption and grace in Jesus Christ. Their lives can be transformed. And they should be able to see the truth of that transformation through the changed lives and actions they see within the body of Christ which is the church.

As we live these things out, we always must remember that we are dealing with our sons and daughters, our friends and close companions – even the person who is a stranger bears the image of God. That's why we must show incredible grace as we deal with these issues in our church and our community. These issues are messy. They are personal. They are real. And Jesus came to us in the midst of them all. I believe that if God had wanted to do so, He could have figured out some way to save us without getting Himself dirty in the process. He could have avoided becoming human through Jesus. He could have saved Himself the trouble of hot and sticky days and sore legs from walking, from the pain of a fever or a twisted ankle, let alone the agony of the cross. But Jesus came so we could know God wanted to be with us. He got into the messy, screwed-up, no-way-out, no-win world and showed us the way home. It's got to be the same way with us. We have to meet people where they are, with real problems, real sins, real choices, and extend the hand of love and compassion to them, even when it means sacrifice on our part. Jesus would have us do nothing less.

This conversation today may have taken you to hard places in your own life and your own past. On the other hand, it might seem a million miles away from the everyday world you face. Whatever the case may be, God is the giver of life, and as such, we must value it from the womb to the grave. There are many ways to do that...next week, we're going to talk about our neighbors and being gracious to those around us. We'll explore that a little further. But for now, be listening for God's promptings and looking around you to see...how can I value the lives around me, born and unborn, rich and poor, believer and stranger and enemy alike, and show them the radical love of God that He has shown me?