

Food for thought

SERMON:

Once upon a time, an Eskimo hunter went to see the local missionary who had been preaching in his village. "I want to ask you something," the hunter said.

"What's that?" the missionary asked.

"If I did not know about God and sin," the hunger said, "would I go to hell?"

"No," the missionary answered, "not if you did not know."

"Then why," asked the hunter, "did you tell me?"

Some of you may remember the hell and brimstone, sin and damnation Sunday sermons with the preacher shouting out all kinds of terrifying threats from his pulpit. In many congregations today, the only sins openly denounced from the pulpit are low attendance, poor stewardship and failure to sign up for a Sunday School class. So, someone came to me a while ago and asked if I would preach about sin some Sunday.

I agreed and today's scripture certainly lends it self to the topic. Sin.....

Were you aware that Sabbath-breaking and image making were once punishable by death? Nowadays few church people think twice about mowing the lawn on Sunday or printing a picture of Christ on a polyester tee shirt. Charging high interest rates (usury) and gluttony (eating too much) have certainly ceased to be serious sins, along with swearing and gambling.

What church today could afford to ban bankers, big eaters or lottery players from their roles? Cohabitation and having children out of wedlock are no longer considered sinful by large segments of the population. Sex before marriage is so routine now that virgin brides and grooms are as rare as comets. Recalling the harshness with which this kind of behavior was once punished, even in the United States, like being locked in stocks in the town square, for instance, or branding people's cheeks with monograms of their sins, it doesn't seem possible that, in fact, the same religion that condemned these sinners so cruelly are still part of our society today.

Could it be that we have changed our notions of sin?

I received a copy of a letter on the internet, it was addressed to the famous radio talk host, Dr. Laura. On Laura Schlessinger's radio show, she said that, homosexuality is an abomination, according to Leviticus 18:22, and cannot be condoned under any circumstance.

The following response was an open letter to Dr. Laura.

"Dear Dr. Laura,

Thank you for doing so much to educate people regarding God's Law. I have learned a great deal from your show, and try to share that knowledge with as many people as I can. I do need some advice from you, however, regarding some other elements of God's Laws and how to follow them.

1. Leviticus 25:44 states that I may possess slaves, both male and female, provided they are purchased from neighboring nations. A friend of mine claims that this applies to Mexicans, but not Canadians. Can you clarify? Why can't I own Canadians?
2. I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her?
3. I know that I am allowed no contact with a woman while she is in her period of menstrual uncleanness - Lev. 15: 19-24. The problem is how do I tell? I have tried asking, but most women take offense.
4. When I burn a bull on the altar as a sacrifice, I know it creates a pleasing odor for the Lord - Lev. 1:9. The problem is my neighbors. They claim the odor is not pleasing to them. Should I smite them?
5. I have a neighbor who insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2. clearly states he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself, or should I ask the police to do it?
6. A friend of mine feels that even though eating shellfish is an abomination - Lev. 11:10, it is a lesser abomination than homosexuality. I don't agree. Can you settle this? Are there 'degrees' of abomination?
7. Lev. 21:20 states that I may not approach the altar of God if I have a defect in my sight. I have to admit that I wear reading glasses. Does my vision have to be 20/20, or is there some wiggle-room here?
8. Most of my male friends get their hair trimmed, including the hair around their temples, even though this is expressly forbidden by Lev. 19:27. How should they die?
9. I know from Lev. 11:6-8 that touching the skin of a dead pig makes me unclean, but may I still play football if I wear gloves?
10. My uncle has a farm. He violates Lev. 19:19 by planting two different crops in the same field, as does his wife by wearing garments made of two different kinds of thread (cotton/polyester blend). He also tends to curse and blaspheme a lot. Is it really necessary that we go to all the trouble of getting the whole town together to stone them? Lev. 24:10-16. Couldn't we just burn them to death at a private family affair, like we do with people who sleep with their in-laws? (Lev. 20:14)

I know you have studied these things extensively and thus enjoy considerable expertise in such matters, so I am confident you can help. Thank you again for reminding us that God's word is eternal and unchanging.

An adoring fan."

Well, you might say.....that's nonsense, that kind of stuff is history..... But, I have wondered, haven't you?how can we use the words of the Bible to condemn some sins, but brand the rest of themno longer applicable.

That certainly is a problem for people like Dr. Laura who consider homosexuality a grievous sin, isn't it? Leviticus 18:22 does say "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is an abomination" (or "an outrage," "detestable," "loathsome" -- The seriousness of the offense is later driven home at Leviticus 20:13, where it is ordered that the offending parties are to be put to death.

But doesn't it seem right that if some Christians today insist on using this passage to condemn homosexuality, shouldn't they also be bound by the other rules and rituals described in Leviticus?.

By the way, among other things, the Holiness Code of Leviticus also prohibits tattoos, wearing certain types of jewelry, Eating certain kinds of meat, cross-breeding livestock and you should know The Holiness Code endorses polygamy and requires Saturday to be reserved as the Sabbath. Doesn't it seem unfair to use these passages to condemn homosexuality, while ignoring the fact that most Christians do not follow the rest of the rules and rituals outlined in the Holiness Code of Leviticus?

I find it of interest that lesbianism is not condemned. The failure to prohibit lesbianism does not seem like an oversight, since the passage on homosexuality is immediately followed by one prohibiting bestiality for both men **and** women. This makes it look like lesbianism simply didn't matter, as long as they did nothing to harm the "seed" of the man!

PAUSE.....

In the second century A.D., a young man grew up looking at the world from a position of unchallenged dominance. Women, slaves and barbarians were considered unalterably different from him. Healers of the day said that males were those fetuses who had realized their full potential. Women, by contrast, were failed males, inferior.

When Jesus came into the world, he lived in a world where women were considered little less than a possession..... Just listen to one of the morning blessings made by an Orthodox Jewish male: 'Blessed are you Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has not made me a woman.'

Okay, okay, some Christians might say.....we don't use the Old Testament for our definitions of sin. We look to Jesus! They consider Old Testament laws that define what is sin do not apply to them. So, let's take a look at the New Testament, to Jesus, to tell us what is sinful for a Christian. Who here believes that Jesus taught that women were inferior to men???? NO, he did not.....But, my friends.....look just look what happened to our scripture.

I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent' our scripture says in I Timothy 2:12. Origen, one of the earliest Bishops in our church, said: "Women are worse than animals because they are continuously full of lust." Tertullian, another Bishop who lived in the 2nd century: said addressing women: "You are the devil's gateway, the first deserter of a divine law...Man, not woman, is made in the image of God."

Do you know that in the early Church there was a vote to determine if women were human or not. The final count was 32 to 31 in favor of women being human. Closer to our time: Luther did not believe women were equal to men...believed women were similar but inferior. Calvin said: "The woman was created in the image of God but in the 2nd degree." Today orthodox Jewish women are still excluded from the praying community and seated behind a screen.

Roman Catholic and conservative Protestant women who want to serve as pastors are asked instead to serve church suppers. We have two churches in town that still exclude women from the ministry. How do you women here feel about that? Until recently, women, even abused women, were taught in many of our Christian churches that they needed to be obedient to their husbands because that is what the Bible teaches and if they were beaten, they didn't do their job. They were told to try harder not to do anything to incur their husband's wrath! In other words, they were the sinners, not their husbands. When women revolted, they were told they were sinning because they were revolting against God himself.

My friends, it took until the twentieth century before women won legal equality in our own "enlightened, Christian nation." My mother was born when women were not allowed to vote. Women have just recently been accepted into ministry. Women still don't have equal rights in the workplace; they often receive less

than their male counterparts for doing the same work. Getting back to the New Testament, we have some scripture that condemn all but the heterosexual male to a life of subservience and/shame.But then why according to other texts of scripture.....does the Spirit testify that we are God's children. If we are children of God, then all humans are heirs--heirs of God. But in our minds many Christians have not accepted the truth that this relates to all of God's children.

Take for example the institution of human slavery perhaps the most degrading form of social subordination. Could anything be more immoral than the buying and selling of fellow human beings into a hopeless life of involuntary servitude? What does the Bible have to say about it? Who here believes that Jesus condemned slavery?

The most astounding pro-slavery statement in the Bible is made by Jesus himself in Matthew 10:24-25. Here he not only reminds slaves that they are never above their master, he actually recommends that they strive to be like him. Throughout the gospels Jesus ignores countless opportunities to condemn slavery.

Paul, the earliest Christian evangelist and a contemporary of Jesus, expresses his unqualified support of the institution of human slavery by instructing slaves to obey their masters in several passages, Ephesians 6:5, I Timothy 6:1 and again in Titus 2:9-10.

What are some other Bible commentaries concerning slavery? Peter, Jesus' favorite disciple, directs slaves to obey and fear their masterwithout question, even though he may be cruel and unjust (1 Peter 2:18).. In Exodus 21:26-27 and Proverbs 29:19 God tells the masters how to punish their slaves.

In Leviticus 25:44-46 God instructs his chosen people on how to treat their slaves. Here he sets a more lenient standard for the Israelite slaves than for those who are not Israelites.

In Exodus 21:20-21 God says that if the master beats a slave to death, the master shall be punished. If, however, the severely beaten slave lingers on for a day or two, the master is off the hook. And there are many more like texts.

Slavery was legal in the United States for almost two hundred and fifty years. Why so long? Maybe that's where the rub comes in because the Bible not only condones slavery, it actually encouraged that cruel institution. Here, for example, is a quote from Jefferson Davis, the first and only president of the Confederacy, "It (slavery) was established by decree of Almighty God and is sanctioned in the Bible, in both Testaments from Genesis to Revelation."

An African American woman was struggling with the realization that her beloved Bible nowhere condemns the institution of human slavery. She wrote: "The Bible says, "Slaves, be obedient to your masters" Yet we esteem as heroes women and men like Harriet Tubman and Denmark Vesey who were disobedient to their "masters," broke the law by taking their freedom, and "stole" other slaves to freedom when they were "legally" the property of their "masters."... In other words.....disobeying not only the law of our country, but what the law in our Bible.

My friends, passages in the Bible often relate to customs of a long-past era that are unethical when compared to today's secular and religious systems of morality. You heard the verses which accept and regulate slavery, there are others that require widows to marry their brother-in-law, requiring victims of rape to marry their rapist, or condone child disciplinary practices which most parents have now abandoned.

Let's take the case of divorce. How many of you believe that Jesus condemned divorce? YES! He did In Matthew 5:31-32 he said, "Furthermore it has been said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' 32 "But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual

immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.

Yet, why is it that even though Jesus himself condemns divorce as a grievance sin against God, **we no longer consider divorce a sin.....**

Let's take it one step further. How many of you believe Jesus condemned homosexuality? NO! Jesus said nothing on this subject in Matthew, Mark, Luke or John? Nothing!

My friends, many Christians claim homosexuality is a grievous sin....and divorce is ok! Doesn't make sense, does it? Sin is puzzling, isn't it?

Add to this the different codes of conduct encountered by Christians who may change denominations....like moving from a tradition in which drinking alcohol is a sin, like the Nazarenes and Baptist churches in town, for instance, to one in which alcohol is used in worship.....like the Episcopal, Catholic Church and some other Protestant denominations. Why is alcohol considered a sin? Jesus certainly drank wine and never said one word about its sinful nature.

There are some Christian churches that condemn dancing. Others hold dances for their youth. And on and on.

This really confuses the whole issue of what is right and what is wrong, doesn't it?. What do you think?

On the issue of homosexuality,

William Sloane Coffin, the famous preacher said: "*In reality, there are no biblical literalists, only selective literalists. By abolishing slavery, accepting divorce and ordaining women, millions of Protestants have gone far beyond biblical literalism. It's time we did the same for homophobia.*"

By the way, I thought you might like to know.....Curiously, "Dr. Laura" has changed her mind about homosexuality. Perhaps with all the research being done on this topic, she has learned that a certain percentage of homosexuality exists within many species of the animal world. In other words, it is natural.

So what is sin? John Wesley taught that there is much in the Bible that is history of the time. And if we are confused about various passages of scripture and how it applies to our lives, he said, always choose that which is the most loving. He taught that the law we MUST follow is this:

Thou shalt love the lord your God and your neighbor as yourself. In other words....anything that harms your neighbor is a sin!

Anything that harms your neighbor is a sin! Anything!

My friends, believe it or not, this is a scary idea for some people. It is a lot easier to condemn others than try to live this law of love given to us by our God of love. Amen.