



*“Though we can’t think alike, may we not love alike?  
May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion?  
Without all doubt we may. Herein all the children of God may unite  
notwithstanding these smaller differences. These remaining as they are,  
they may forward one another in love and in good works.”*  
— John Wesley from his sermon “Catholic Spirit”

We believe that a path exists to loving each other even as we may not agree. We believe the Bible and the teaching of Jesus hold the key to this better way. In this sermon series, we’re going to explore how we, as Clay Church, and as faithful followers of Jesus with a mission of “walking with more people toward a transforming relationship with Jesus Christ”, can navigate the difficult conversations of the year ahead. We’re going to anchor ourselves in what the Bible says and in Jesus’ command to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. May we grow through this series in our love of one another and in good works.

**NOTE: The focus for these conversations is on the Bible and not specific political positions. We urge Circles to avoid debating personal positions.**

Questions marked with \*\* can be used as “sharing without response exercises”, allowing your group to focus on listening to each other and learning instead of debating. On the marked questions, you can invite each person to write answers on a note card. Then one at a time, read them without response or further conversation. Participants should read only what is on their card and not add to what is written once sharing has started.

# THE BIBLE TELLS ME...WHAT?!

## **The Bible Tells Me...What?!**

What does the Bible tell us? How is it that faithful followers of Jesus can read it and come to different conclusions? How *do* we read and interpret it? This January and February we are going to explore what the Bible says about the sometimes contentious issues in our society today.

### **FEB 2: What Matters Most: Biblical Foundations (Matthew 22:34-40)**

Jesus told us what is most important! And he would often say of the Scriptures, “you have heard it said, but I say...” How can we use the teachings of Jesus to navigate a world that is always changing, always growing, and always learning? What is core and what is cultural? How do we determine what matters most?

**Jesus invites us to ask of any belief or position:**

**How does this reflect the love of God and love of neighbor?**

### **FEB 9: Wars, Weapons, and Violence: Biblical Perspectives (Isaiah 2:3-5)**

Some read the Bible and find evidence for “just wars”. Some read the Bible and find a call to be pacifists. Today we find great tension around the issues of gun control, weapons, the death penalty, and violence in our communities. The Bible has many references to violence, weapons, and war. So what does it say? And what do we learn from its teaching?

**Ultimate peace comes not from weapons but from God.**

### **FEB 16: Racism and Oppression: Biblical Interpretations (Galatians 3:23-4:7)**

Racism, oppression, the Holocaust – all of these wounds and scars on our human community have been justified with Bible verses and Biblical interpretation. How do we grapple with Biblical interpretation that has changed over the last 2000 years? How do we prevent the Bible and what it says from being used in divisive, hateful, and repressive ways?

**Use of Scripture in ways that are oppressive, hateful, or without grace is not the way of Jesus.**

### **FEB 23: Homosexuality and Marriage: Biblical Questions (John 8:1-11)**

Some people read the Bible and interpret it to say homosexuality is a sin. Some read the Bible and see that the texts about same sex acts are highly contextual. Some read the Bible as defining marriage between a man and a woman. Some point out that Jesus didn’t speak about same sex couples, nor about marriage except in the context of divorce. So what do we do when faithful Christians face a divide that seems insurmountable? Listen to each other. Don’t judge. Ask thoughtful questions. Listen some more. Pray.

**The way of Jesus is the only way to reconciliation and true communion.**

# THE BIBLE TELLS ME...WHAT?!

## **LIFE REFLECTIONS FOR WEEK 1 (FEBRUARY 3-8) What Matters Most**

- Mon: Deuteronomy 6:4-9 What does it mean to love God with all of your being?
- Tues: Exodus 20:1-17 Are the Ten Commandments core to a Christian identity?  
If yes, do you follow all of them?
- Wed: Leviticus 19:1-18 Do all of the commands of Leviticus apply to us as Jesus followers today? Why yes or why no?
- Thur: Matthew 22:34-40 What does Jesus say is most important to our faith?
- Fri: Mark 12:28-34 How does our understanding of what is most important lead us nearer to the kingdom of God?
- Sat: Luke 10:25-29 Who is your neighbor?

## **LIFE REFLECTIONS FOR WEEK 2 (FEBRUARY 10-15) Wars, Weapons, & Violence**

- Mon: Isaiah 2:3-5 What do you think God's vision is for His creation?
- Tues: Genesis 4:6-16 Where do you think violence comes from?
- Wed: Genesis 6:5-6 Do you think God is indifferent or that God grieves violence and death as much or more than we do?
- Thur: Matthew 26:51-52 What does Jesus say about violence?
- Fri: Psalm 20:1-7 Where do you put your ultimate trust?
- Sat: 2 Corinthians 10:3-5 What "battles" matter the most in our lives?

## **LIFE REFLECTIONS FOR WEEK 3 (FEBRUARY 17-22) Racism and Oppression**

- Mon: Genesis 1:26-28 What does it mean to be created "in the image of God"?
- Tues: Titus 2:9-10 Today, how do you understand passages in the Bible that were once used to support slavery in our country?
- Wed: Amos 5:4-24 Where do you see injustice around you today?
- Thur: Psalm 37:27-28 What does justice look like for those whose families have suffered from oppression or slavery?
- Fri: Luke 4:14-30 What do we do with messages of Jesus that challenge us?
- Sat: Galatians 3:23-4:7 How would our communities be transformed if we, the Church, treated each other as "one in Christ Jesus"?

## **LIFE REFLECTIONS FOR WEEK 4 (FEBRUARY 24-29) Homosexuality and Marriage**

- Mon: Romans 14:1-23 When is preserving a relationship or connection with someone more important than winning an argument?
- Tues: 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 How do you define sin?
- Wed: Romans 1:18-32 What does it mean to serve creation instead of Creator?
- Thur: Romans 2:1-4 Why do Jesus and Paul both warn against judging others?
- Fri: James 2:8-13 What does "mercy triumphs over judgment" mean to you?
- Sat: 1 John 4:7-21 How does perfect love cast out fear?

# THE BIBLE TELLS ME...WHAT?!

## What Matters Most: Biblical Foundations – SERMON ON FEBRUARY 2, 2020

The Bible is filled with some commands we consider a bit strange today. For example, Leviticus 19 says not to wear anything woven with two kinds of cloth, not to cut one's sideburns or the edges of the beard, not to get tattoos, not to eat raw meat, and not to breed two kinds of animal. So how do we interpret the laws of the Old Testament and know what is core to the faith today and what is cultural or contextual?

**DISCUSSION: What is a Bible story, passage, or teaching that you find challenging?**

Read Deuteronomy 5:1-22 & Deuteronomy 6:4-9. Deuteronomy 6:4-9 is known as the Shema. This call to know one God and worship God with total allegiance stands in the book of Deuteronomy between the Ten Commandments and the collection of laws that follow. In this place, the Shema, giving ultimate loyalty and total trust and devotion to the one, true God, becomes the centerpiece of faith.

**DISCUSSION: What does a life look like if one truly loves God with all of one's heart, all of one's mind, and all of one's strength?**

Read Matthew 22:34-40, Mark 12:28-34, and Luke 10:25-29. Notice the similarities and differences in the way they tell the same story. When challenged about what is most important, Jesus says everything can be summed up in two commands. **Jesus invites us to ask of any belief or position: How does this reflect the love of God and love of neighbor?**

As we wrestle with interpreting the Bible, this teaching of Jesus can help. We can ask, what is core and never changes, and what is cultural or contextual and may change. For example, Jesus Christ as our Savior is core; the details and order of the Gospel stories are cultural and contextual. The Bible as our holy book is core; Sunday School is cultural and contextual. Corporate worship is core; organ and praise bands are cultural and contextual. Knowing what is core and cultural for others can help us learn from and understand each other in the midst of challenging conversations.

**\*\*DISCUSSION: What teachings of Jesus and the Bible, or beliefs, are core for you?**

### **CHOOSE A NEXT STEP:**

- 1. Make a list of values and beliefs that are important to you and divide them into core and cultural/contextual categories.**
- 2. On a notecard or post-it, write, "How does this reflect the love of God and love of neighbor?" Put the card somewhere visible and use it when making decisions.**
- 3. Invite someone to worship with you this month.**

# THE BIBLE TELLS ME...WHAT?!

## **Wars, Weapons, & Violence: Biblical Perspectives – SERMON ON FEBRUARY 9, 2020**

*(NOTE: The focus for this conversation is on the Bible and not specific political issues. We urge Circles to avoid debating personal positions on divisive issues.)*

The term “gun” isn’t in the Bible, nor do we find specific policies about war. The Bible does, however, speak of weapons and violence, of battles and God’s heart for His creation. So how can Biblical principles and stories help us to talk about and reflect ethically on today’s issues around guns, war, and violence?

**DISCUSSION: Have you ever been in a fight? If yes, why did it start?**

Read Genesis 4:6-16 & Genesis 6:5-12. The Biblical narrative shares that violence has been present nearly from the beginning of creation.

**DISCUSSION: What do you learn from these verses about God and about us?**

**Where do you think God is in the midst of battles and violence in our world today?**

**Do you think God grieves, or is angry, or is indifferent to violence in His creation?**

Read Luke 22:36-53, Matthew 26:47-54, & John 18:33-36. Jesus warns his disciples not to live by the sword. We have no stories of them defending themselves after this teaching despite harassment, beatings, and giving their lives. Why? In John’s Gospel, Jesus tells Pilate his disciples aren’t fighting because His kingdom isn’t of this world.

**\*\*DISCUSSION: What does Jesus teach about conflict and violence?**

**As a follower of Jesus, what do you think a path to peace looks like?**

Read Isaiah 2:3-5, Psalm 20:1-7, & 2 Corinthians 10:3-5. Isaiah presents a powerful vision from God of a time without violence and war, when weapons are no longer needed. Psalm 20 says our ultimate trust should be in God, not weapons and power. And in 2 Corinthians Paul says the most crucial battles in life are spiritual, not physical.

**DISCUSSION: Do you find your focus more on your physical safety and security or on the eternal safety and spiritual security God offers us in Jesus? Why?**

**CHOOSE A NEXT STEP:**

- 1. Pray each day this week for an end to violence in our community and for solutions to the issues that lead to violence.**
- 2. Commit, as an individual or as a Circle, to attending the next gathering in South Bend for someone who is the victim of violence in our community.**
- 3. Learn a little bit about Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his struggle with a violent world:**  
<https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/martyrs/dietrich-bonhoeffer.html>

# THE BIBLE TELLS ME...WHAT?!

## **Racism and Oppression: Biblical Interpretations – SERMON ON FEBRUARY 16, 2020**

The human issue of fearing those who are not like us is not new. Some would say we can trace it back all the way to Cain and Abel, one a herdsman roaming the land and one a farmer settling the land, with one willing to kill the other. Today, we continue to see the devastating effects of racism, prejudices, and xenophobia in our communities. So what does the Bible say, and how do we interpret what we find there?

**DISCUSSION: Share an example of prejudice that you have seen or experienced.**

Read Genesis 9:18-27, Titus 2:9-10, & Ephesians 6:5-7. Genesis 9, and what has come to be called the “curse of Ham”, was long used by church-going slave owners to say that one race was inferior and meant to serve. The household codes found in Titus and Ephesians were used to tell slaves they should obey their masters. For over 200 years in this country our laws reflected these Christian teachings.

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann wrote in his book, *Chosen?: Reading the Bible Amid the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*: “Clearly, it is not simply exegesis that determines how we read the Bible; rather, it is our vested interests, our hopes, and our fears that largely determine our reading. And because the reach of the gracious God of the Bible is toward the other, we ought rightly to be skeptical and suspicious of any reading of the Bible that excludes the other, because it is likely to be informed by vested interest, fears, and hopes that serve self-protection and end in self-destruction.”

In the sermon, Brian said, “Use of Scripture in ways that are oppressive, hateful, or without grace is not the way of Jesus.”

**DISCUSSION: Today, what do we do with passages like those in Titus and Ephesians that support slavery?**

Read Amos 5:4-24. Martin Luther King, Jr., said, “So let us be maladjusted, as maladjusted as the prophet Amos, who in the midst of the injustices of his day could cry out in words that echo across the centuries, ‘Let justice run down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.’”

**\*\*DISCUSSION: Where do you see injustice in our community? In what ways are we adjusted to these injustices instead of standing for justice?**

According to a 2017 Gallup poll, 42 percent of Americans worry a “great deal” about race relations in the US, up 7 percent from 2016 and a record high in Gallup’s seventeen-year polling trend. It was the third straight year Americans said they increasingly worry about this issue.

## THE BIBLE TELLS ME...WHAT?!

Studies between 2010 and 2015 showed the following:

- People with “black-sounding names” had to send out 50 percent more job applications than people with “white-sounding names” to get a callback.
- Black children make up 18% of the pre-school population in the US, but serve over 50% of out-of-school suspensions.
- A black man is three times more likely to be searched at a traffic stop and six times more likely to go to jail than a white man.
- Blacks serve up to 20 percent more time in prison than white people for the same crimes.
- If a black person kills a white person, he or she is twice as likely to receive the death sentence as a white person who kills a black person.

A generation after the 1954 Brown school desegregation decision, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, racial discrimination continues in our country. FBI reports say that 57 percent of hate crimes today are racially motivated

Read Micah 6:1-8 and Galatians 3:23-4:7.

**DISCUSSION:** Where, in your own life, do you know you have preconceived notions of a group of people or prejudices, where you don't always see the “other” as a child of God? As followers of Jesus, in light of the Biblical witness, what is our call and our responsibility in the face of prejudice and injustice in our communities?

### **CHOOSE A NEXT STEP:**

1. Read and pray through 1 John 4:7-21 each day for a week. At the end of the week, reflect on how the passage spoke to you throughout the week.
2. Participate in the 21 Day Racial Equity Habit Building Challenge with the plan and resources shared at [debbyirving.com/21-day-challenge](http://debbyirving.com/21-day-challenge).
3. Read a book on racism or oppression that expands your view. Recommendations: *White Rage* by Carol Anderson, *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander, *Stamped From The Beginning* by Imbram X. Kendi, *Waking Up White* by Debby Irving, or *Divided by Faith* by Michael Emerson and Christian Smith.

# THE BIBLE TELLS ME...WHAT?!

## **Homosexuality and Marriage: Biblical Questions - SERMON ON FEBRUARY 23, 2020**

Some people read the Bible and interpret it to say homosexuality is a sin. Some read the Bible and see that the texts about same sex acts are highly contextual. Some read the Bible as defining marriage between a man and a woman. Some point out that Jesus didn't speak about same sex couples, nor about marriage except in the context of divorce. So what do we do when faithful Christians face a divide that seems insurmountable? Listen to each other. Don't judge. Ask thoughtful questions. Listen some more. Pray.

**DISCUSSION: Who is someone who has helped you in your spiritual growth?  
What did they teach you, and how?**

You may have come to this conversation knowing what you think and needing to share. You may have come ready for some answers. You may be ready to dive into the topic. You may be thinking that it would be best not to talk about homosexuality and marriage at all. So before continuing, here are a few things to consider:

- This guide and the resulting conversation will not end any debate once and for all.
- This guide will provide context and questions, not answers.
- This guide is designed to encourage sharing and listening, not arguing or convincing anyone of a particular way of thinking.
- This guide is a tool, and admittedly an imperfect one.
- This guide intentionally begins not with the issues, but with Paul's words to the church in Rome as it struggled with deep disagreements.

Read Romans 14:1-23. Paul writes to the church in Rome which, based on the context of the letter, seems to be struggling with strong disagreements about eating "unclean meat" and keeping holy days. In his commentary on Romans in the *New International Bible Commentary*, Leslie C. Allen summarizes what Paul speaks into the midst of this community tension: "It is nothing less than usurping Christ's sovereign authority over a fellow-Christian to criticize him over a difference of opinion: for the less scrupulous to look down on the more scrupulous, or for the more scrupulous to judge the less scrupulous. Christian fellowship does not imply a right to run other people's lives for them: only Christ can—and will—discharge such a right."

**DISCUSSION: Read Romans 14:17. How might we apply Paul's words in this verse when we disagree as followers of Jesus?**

There are, depending on what you read, six or seven verses of Scripture that speak to the issue of same-sex sexual acts in the Bible. To put this in some context, one study says there are over 2300 verses about money and possessions.



## THE BIBLE TELLS ME...WHAT?!

Read Leviticus 18:19-30 and 20:6-15. Some crazy stuff in these verses, right? Some people point to these verses, which sit in lists of inappropriate sexual relations, as support for naming same-sex acts as sin. Others point out that we don't follow these laws anymore. For example, we don't exile those who have sexual relations while a woman is experiencing her period, we don't stone people for cursing their parents, and we don't submit people to the death penalty for taboo sex acts.

Read Romans 1:18-2:4 and 1 Corinthians 6:9-11. These two passages, and a similar passage in 1 Timothy, name same-sex sexual acts in lists of those who "sin" or who won't inherit the kingdom of God. Those who believe homosexuality is a sin consider all three verses clear witness to the Bible's teachings. Others, however, point out that in context these are not speaking of committed or monogamous same sex relationships. The Romans passage, in particular, is Paul's instruction in the face of temple cultic worship and can be read as condemning those who give up "natural" ways (heterosexual) for the cultic temple practices of "unnatural" ways (in other words, heterosexual people engaging in homosexual acts).

### **\*\*DISCUSSION: Consider the following questions...**

- How do you decide which Scriptures are binding for us today and which are not?
- How do you define sin?
- When educated, thoughtful, faithful Biblical scholars and Jesus followers disagree, who gets to determine the interpretation of a Bible passage?
- Why do you think this issue and these six or seven verses take up so much more energy and space in our church and cultural conversation than any other issue?

Read John 8:1-11, 1 John 4:7-21, James 2:8-13.

**DISCUSSION:** In our modern, day-to-day lives, in what ways do we, in effect, "cast stones" at individuals who we consider to be outside our norms of righteousness? How would Jesus tell us to handle these situations?

### **CHOOSE A NEXT STEP:**

1. Attend a "Prayers for the Church" gathering, or download the resource from the Clay website and pray individually or with your Circle for the church. (Find the resource and the gathering times and places at [www.claychurch.com](http://www.claychurch.com))
2. Join a *Let's Keep Talking Group* at Clay Church to stay engaged, to keep learning, and to continue the conversation with those who may have different views.
3. Read *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church* (Counterpoints: Bible and Theology), ed. Stanley Grundy (Zondervan, 2016).