***JUST DO THE RIGHT THING!***

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September 3, 2023

Texts: Jeremiah 15:15-21 and Romans 12:9-21

Across our lives many of us have had the benefit of sage advice or not-so-sage advice offered by family, friends, colleagues, or casual acquaintances. Some of that advice is sought after; most of it is volunteered. Some of it is helpful and even life-changing, though most of it falls short of that mark. Some of you may remember the classic scene in *The Graduate* when a family friend approaches a young Dustin Hoffman at his graduation party to offer a single word of advice: *Plastics!* Or perhaps you recall the advice offered by Will Rogers but often ignored by preachers: “*Never miss a good chance to shut up*.” Or perhaps you cherish the wisdom of that great philosopher Yogi Berra: ‘*You can observe a lot by watching*.” How often has some well-meaning person said, “*If I were you, I would…*” and maybe you would or maybe you wouldn’t. Where do you turn for advice on what to do when trying to decide what it is you *should* do?

The pages of Scripture offer a lot of advice on how we should live, and because the voices of Scripture are many, so too are the variety of suggestions.

From the prophet Amos we hear: *Seek good and not evil.* *Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream*. The prophet Micah says: D*o justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.* The Ten Commandments set some guideposts within which we should live, and Jesus offers the Great Commandment: *Love God with all that you are, and love your neighbor as yourself.* Then in the conclusion to Matthew’s Gospel he charges his disciples: “*Go and make disciples of all nations.*” One or all of those passages may be helpful to you in deciding what to do in any given circumstance, though truth be known, we may be more prone to offer our own advice to God as we heard in Jeremiah’s prayer: *Remember me and visit me,*

*and bring down retribution for me on my persecutors!*

In a recent article in *The Christian Century* about reimagining church, Julian DeShazier quotes pastor Solomon Missouri as critiquing some of the church’s recent attempts at innovation as: “*just church with skinny jeans*.” It is a great image, isn’t it – not pastor with skinny jeans thankfully, but church with skinny jeans! By that he means that churches are tinkering with the trappings of church, rather than diving more deeply into the substance of what we do as the church in order to reach the growing group of nones – NONE, not NUN – who have left the church. DeShazier encourages a deeper look into what we do and suggests we consider “*innovation in a way that isn’t obsessed with the* ***new*** *but instead seeks out the* ***right*** *thing.”* [[1]](#endnote-1) If we could just find the **right** **thing** and then do the **right thing** – whether it be new or old – perhaps the church would be more relevant to the lives of more people today. *“Maybe,*” he suggests, “*the answer isn’t a new thing but a new way, one that invites us to mine deep into our tradition and beyond to find the faithful way forward – what’s called sankofa in West African religious practice.”*

*Sankofa* – the faithful thing, the right thing – isn’t that what we all want to do as the church and as individuals? Perhaps, but truth be told we don’t **always** want to do the right thing or the faithful thing, because sometimes the right thing is also the hard thing or the faithful thing is also the painful thing or the unpopular thing or the uncomfortable thing – not something we want to do. Sometimes we just want to do the selfish thing and leave the right thing to someone else. *Just do the right thing!* sounds like a pretty good motto to live by, but putting it into practice is much harder. It is an easy mantra to repeat but a hard way to live. It sounds like guidance Jesus might offer to his disciples somewhere along the way, and as we all know, Jesus was never one to make the lives of his disciples easy. *Just do the right thing!* It sounds so simple, but it can be so hard!

It is hard in two respects – first: figuring out what the right thing is, and second: doing it, especially if it is not the thing you want to do. While we might prefer a clear sign from God in every instance about what the right thing is, most of the time we have to figure it out for ourselves. And it is in that figuring that those voices in Scripture speak to us.

In his letter to the Romans Paul doesn’t’ pretend to tell us exactly what the right thing is in all circumstances, but he does offer guidance for ethical living. He doesn’t say, do this because that is what Jesus would do. That would be too concise, and being concise is not Paul’s greatest strength. Instead, he offers a litany of directions for Christian living, like the rules we learned in kindergarten:

Don’t hit.

Don’t run with scissors.

Tell the truth.

Wash your hands before you eat.

If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all.

Don’t bite!

Paul offers specific directions for Christian living and doing the right thing. Within the space of twelve verses, he manages to identify twenty-six suggestions by my count, which might reasonably be reduced to these ten:

1. Hate evil and hold fast to the good (echoing Amos).
2. Love one another (echoing Jesus).
3. Be ardent (that is passionate and persevering) in spirit.
4. Serve the Lord.
5. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, and persevere in prayer.
6. Help the saints and welcome strangers.
7. Reject revenge and bless your enemies.
8. Live in harmony with all.
9. Be humble and noble.
10. Overcome evil with good.

If you do those things, then you do the right things, he suggests. There is in that list a certain constancy, an integrity about living that is not dependent upon circumstance, but is solely dependent upon God. It is there in commanding us to hate evil, but not to repay the hated evil with evil. It is there in commanding us to help the saints, welcome strangers, and meet the basic needs of our enemies – treating them all – friend and foe, saint and sinner alike – with respect and love. We are to love them all, care for them all. In response to the grace that God has shown all of us in Jesus Christ who lived, died, and rose again for ***all*** of us, we are to try to live peaceably with ***all*** our neighbors.

Now Paul is realistic enough to recognize that such an ethic offers no guarantees. Live peaceably with all *if it is possible*, says Paul. Live peaceably with all *so far as it depends on you*, he says. Others may make choices that will disrupt the peace – terrorists will take innocent lives, friends will break promises, classmates will tease you, business associates may take advantage of you. What Paul proposes is that we do the right thing regardless of what others do. If someone does you wrong, love him in return. If someone makes your life miserable, pray for her. Regardless of what someone does to you, do the right thing, the good thing, the loving thing, the Christ-like thing.

Interestingly there is some unrest in evangelical circles these days around some of Jesus’ teachings. Several evangelical pastors have faced criticism from members of their congregation for quoting the words of Jesus. The criticism is that Jesus’ teachings are too Woke. They are unrealistic, too compassionate, and not tough enough for the 21st century world in which we live. As numerous commentators have pointed out, there is no consensus on what Woke means – it seems to mean different things to different people. But rejecting the teachings of Jesus because they don’t fit into some political perspective is patently un-Christian. We do not have the luxury of rejecting Jesus’ teachings. We may have to wrestle with them and struggle to interpret how they are to be lived out in our current context, but simply choosing to ignore Jesus’ teachings on any matters we don’t like or that we find hard is not an option for us as his disciples.

Loving your enemies and praying for those who persecute you is hard. It may not be as tough-sounding or satisfying as Jeremiah’s plea for God to bring down retribution on his persecutors, but it is what Jesus calls us to do. We may want to retaliate against those who do us harm – an eye for an eye – but as Mahatma Gandhi is said to have said: “*An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind*.” Too much conflict in our world results from the repayment of evil with evil perpetuating cycles of revenge. A Christian ethic demands a different response, says Paul. If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink. Overcome evil with good.

What difference might there be in our lives, if we sought to do just that: to overcome evil with good, to do the right thing in God’s eyes all the time? What if we rejected the “she did that to me” excuse to justify our actions, and simply did what God wants us to do? What if we tried to do the right thing – not some of the time, but all the time? It might mean biting your tongue, swallowing your pride, or moving out of your comfort zone. It might mean taking an unpopular stance, befriending an unpopular person, or becoming unpopular yourself. It might mean being more Woke or less Woke, as others may define it. It might mean leaving unscratched the itch for revenge or retort. It most certainly will demand a lot less judgment and a lot more prayer. It offers no promise of popularity or prosperity or even peace with our enemies; but it does offer something more – faithfulness to God who is always faithful to us. It is what God asks of us, what Jesus modeled for us: in all you do, all the time, just do the right thing! Amen

1. Julian DeShazier, “Reimagining how we reimagine church”, in *The Christian Century*, July 2023, pp.32-33 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)