

biblestudy: january 2019

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Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

January 6, 2019 Text: Thessalonians 3:1-5, 2 John 4-11 “Hold Fast to God’s Love”

This is the first time I have typed “2019.” The first of these weekly Bible studies was written for December 2, 2001. That means we have been together for a long time! Thank you for joining me on this journey.

The two readings for this week’s study are clear: not all “truths” are equal. The writer of 2 Thessalonians and the writer of 2 John both call “evil” those who depart from the message of Jesus Christ (2 Thessalonians 3:2, 2 John 11). I guess we might put it this way in today’s language: “‘Anything goes’ doesn’t go for a follower of Jesus Christ.”

A few verses past our selection, Paul balances the harshness of challenging the Thessalonians to avoid these evil persons. Even as Paul warns his readers not to associate with these evil teachers, he reminds them “not to treat them like enemies, but warn them like you would do for a brother or sister.” (Compare Matthew 18:15-17.)

The elder (2 John 1) who writes to his community about living a life of love (2 John 5-6) also urges them not to confuse love with wishy-washy thinking. He suggests that one of the most loving things we can do is to be steadfast in the truth. It is not love to give others a false impression about Jesus Christ. It is not love to let a deceitful teacher get away with false instruction.

January 13, 2019 Text: James 4:1-10 “Submit to God in Love”

In a time, such as these days, when there seem to be factions within the Church that are at war with each other, it is instructive to review a text such as this week’s assigned verses. Note how James 4 begins, with words (in Common English Bible) such as conflict, disputes, cravings, war, murder, jealous, struggle, fight, evil, unfaithful (James 4:1-4)., If it is any comfort, note that we are not the first Christians who had a hard time getting along with one another.

The writer—some students of the Bible think this James was the brother of the Lord (Galatians 1:19)—offers several values by which the Church ought to live out the Gospel.

One of these standards is humility (James 4:6, 10). God is more likely to reveal truth to the humble rather than the proud. (The proud may not have room for truth!) If I am convinced that I am sole possessor of God’s will, I should wonder if I am taking credit for something that is God’s to give. Perhaps it is into my uncertainty, my open-mindedness, my emptiness that God is able to reveal truth.

Another principle is the revelation of Scripture (James 4:5). Evidently, James had observed that some of the community ignored the account of what God had done and said with God’s people. For James, the Scripture would be those times and lives that unfolded in the story of the Hebrew people temptation is to have a conclusion and then to ramble around in the Scripture to find support for what we have already con-

cluded. When we do that, we have made Scripture “meaningless,” as this verse cautions.

In what ways does this instruction speak to us in 2019? What are the assaults our culture brings against the truth of Jesus Christ? What does it mean to say that Jesus was not human? What does it mean to your faith journey to honor the claim that Jesus was indeed human?

What Someone Else Has Said:

Sara Miles (*City of God: Faith in the Streets*, Jericho Books) has written: “Heavenly comfort, rather, is truth, which blows away human fantasies that we can live forever, control everything, or fake our lives before God.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Come, Holy Truth, dwell in our hearts and minds...”

A third guideline for making decisions about how to live out God’s purposes is “don’t succumb to worldly values” (James 4:4). We don’t withdraw from the world—God certainly didn’t (John 1:14)—but we are called not to use worldly standards for the decisions we make. To try to please God and please the world makes us “double-minded” (James 4:8).

Sneak a look at the verses that follow this week’s text, James 4:11-12. Love, not judgment, is the way we relate to one another. That’s part of the humility piece that underlines so much of what James has written. “This is what I have heard God say; what have you heard God say?”

What Someone Else Has Said:

Stephen Jurovics (*Hospitable Planet*, Morehouse) describes his journey: “But most importantly, I try to walk the talk. When I became a Christian, I started looking for ways to better align my beliefs with my actions.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Lord, I open my heart and mind to what You want to say to me...”

January 20, 2019 Text: Philippians 1:12-21 “Submit to God in Christ”

Paul wrote this letter when he was in prison (Philippians 1:13). Those who imprisoned him no doubt thought that would shut down the throttle on Christian proclamation. But, rather than reducing witnesses for Christ, Paul’s jail time has actually led to an increase in those who boldly speak for the Lord (Philippians 1:14). I am reminded of the story of Joseph and his nefarious brothers. When all was said and done, Joseph said to them, “You planned something bad for me, but God produced something good from it” (Genesis 50:20).

That ought to be an encouraging word when everything seems to go awry! God is able to use even our feeble or misguided efforts to do good things. In this letter, Paul tells how some preachers have had such bad motives as jealousy and competition (Philippians 1:15), but even so, Christ is proclaimed and sinners are converted. As Paul wrote the Corinthians: “But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us” (2 Corinthians 5:7). God is able to use even the shattered clay of our lives.

Paul did not know whether he would live to get out of prison (Philippians 1:20) but he was confident that either circumstance, life or death, could be an occasion for praising God. He was forthright in writing: “Because for me, living serves Christ and dying is even better” (Philippians 1:21). That sounds like a win-win!

Sometimes a broken relationship leads to a better self-awareness. Sometimes a tragic loss leads to a renewed appreciation for life. Sometimes a bitter defeat leads to more appropriate values. Sometimes a desperate illness leads to the discovery of an amazing support community. These mysteries are beyond our human reasoning or understanding; in fact, there are those who would label this thinking simply as “Pollyannaish”. But Paul writes of One who took on death and conquered it. Paul writes of One who took on sin and overcame it. Paul writes of One who made divine lemonade out of human lemons.

This is no call just to sit back and let life happen. We are still called to

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do the best we can, but it is with the confidence that God can use our failures, our successes, our mysteries, our hopes to achieve God’s good will. Thanks be to God!

What Someone Else Has Said:

In Jan Karon’s novel *Somewhere Safe with Somebody Good* (Putnam) a woman is wondering about a life choice. Her companion

advises “God will use it for good is my guess. He doesn’t like to waste anything; he’s thrifty as a New Englander.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “I offer it all to You, O Lord...”

January 27, 2019 Text: Philippians 2:1-11 “Devote All to Christ”

So, I said to ten year-old Parker as we completed his God and Family studies, “Why don’t we celebrate this by going out for a pizza?” He hesitated a moment and then replied, “Could we do this for my whole family?” Others.

So, the Sunday School class had to decide how to spend the money it had saved for a class party. One member made a motion, “I move that we give it to the Urban Ministry Center.” Others.

So, the woman, really eager to get home, with her shopping basket piled high, moved for her turn at the checkout. That was when she noticed the young mother trying to balance three children and her groceries cart. “You go first,” the woman said. Others.

So, Jesus had the form of God, but “emptied himself by taking the form of a slave and by becoming like human beings.” (Philippians 2:7) Others.

Yes, Paul quotes this hymn (Philippians 2:6-11) to point out to the Philippian believers that Jesus Christ sets the example of being for others rather than being for self.

The gift of Jesus is not just for some. Notice the expansive wording

that Paul uses to describe the wideness of God’s mercy: “everyone in heaven, on earth, and under the earth” (Philippians 2:10). As Jerry Sumney has observed: “All beings in all regions of the universe are to submit to Christ’s authority.”

Even so, as noted in the examples above from ordinary people in ordinary places, we are to live out that submission to Christ in our daily experiences: Others.

This is not so that we can demean ourselves. It is so we can become fully who God has created us to be, created for relationship (Genesis 2:18). Others.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Pope Francis Among the Wolves* (Columbia University Press), Marco Politi quotes the pontiff: “truth, according to the Christian faith, is the love of God for us in Jesus Christ. Therefore, truth is a relationship.” To which Politi adds, “(Truth) is the same thing as love. And it demands humility and openness if it is to be sought for, heeded, and expressed.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Open my eyes, grace-giving God, to those around me...”

Happy New Year 2019



A new commandment I give to you, even as I have loved you, you also love one another. John 13:34