

**Text:** [Matthew 12:9-14](#)

**Date:** October 2, 2022

**Title:** “What Is the Bible” > How do we resolve the questions?  
The Holy Bible: Faith, Frustration & Fascination, Week 3

**Theme:** When we feel confused or conflicted about scripture, we follow the way of Jesus, the Word of God.

## 1

One of the inherent limitations of being human is we can only truly understand the times we were born into

History helps, but most of us don't like studying it all that much

As a result, we often lack context

We tend to believe every situation we face is brand-new

But in reality, like the scripture says, “there's nothing new under the sun”  
(Ecclesiastes 1:9)

Including debates about scripture!

Of course, the topics change.

Today it's about LGBTQ rights – obviously still a live question, given that someone this past week stole all the signs from our property

A hundred years ago, the debate would have been about evolution, in the 1800s it was about slavery

So these questions are nothing new for the Church

We just picked up from the ancient rabbis who were debating them long before we ever entered the picture

## 2

Two weeks ago, we talked about the nature of inspiration – what we mean when we say the Bible is the inspired Word

Last week, Rachel talked about questions and doubts – and how the Bible invites us into a conversation that can reveal many things – most importantly, the state of our own hearts

Today, I thought it might be helpful to look at a story where Jesus was drawn into a question about scripture  
To understand how he interpreted it

The reading from Matthew 12 is part of a longer section about the meaning and importance of the Sabbath  
A debate Christians hardly engage anymore, except to lament how youth sports interfere with Sunday worship

But in reality, Sabbath is one of God's Top 10  
Since the very beginning, this Commandment been essential to Jewish life  
The notion that God has hallowed time  
By setting aside one day every week for rest and renewal

In the gospels, Jesus enters into several controversies and questions around the topic

In fact, I believe he sometimes *provoked* them, specifically by performing healings on the Sabbath

Which tells me that it was a live conversation during his time

### 3

Today's story goes like this:

Jesus shows up for worship in the synagogue

And man with a disability of the hand – likely something he's been living with for some time – is there

So the Pharisees – scholars of the law – ask the question:

“What does the Law say about healing on the Sabbath?”

Clearly, it's a trap

They know Jesus is compassionate

They also know people say he has the power to heal

If Jesus turns away and doesn't heal the man, he is revealed as a fraud – an uncaring hypocrite or a powerless charlatan

If he heals the man, he will reveal himself as someone with little regard for the traditions of his people

Which generally allowed for healing on the Sabbath only in cases of necessity – when life was threatened, or a woman was in labor

Now, if the man had suffered with his condition for a while, it could hardly be called an emergency  
So Jesus would appear to be stuck

Except, he's not  
Instead, he appeals to a familiar situation among farmers in Galilee  
"Well, take this example: if you go home right now and find that one of your sheep fell down a well, won't you pull it out – Sabbath or no Sabbath?"

Jesus knows the audience will be sympathetic to his argument

As people begin to nod their heads, he asks the question:  
"Well, if you'd do that for your sheep, shouldn't we do that for the person sitting right in front of us?"  
Then he goes ahead and heals the man

#### 4

Do you remember what Jesus says when he's asked what the most important commandment?  
He says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:35-40, Mark 12:28-31, Luke 10:25-38)  
That's what we call *The Great Commandment*

And as you can imagine, many disputes in interpretation arise when these two ideas seem to come in conflict

Like here:

Is the Sabbath primarily **a duty to God** by recognizing and honoring God's role in Creation?

Or is it primarily about **caring for people** by not working them to death?

Jesus, over and over again, seems to favor caring for people  
Take, for example, this passage from the Sermon on the Mount  
Jesus is talking about going to worship when you are in the midst of a disagreement with someone:

"If you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift at the altar and go. First make things right with your brother or sister, then come back and offer your gift." (Matthew 5:23-24)

I would argue that this is a prime example of Jesus' method of interpreting scripture – relationships between people are primary

Because our love for God is *only as good as our love for people*, the way we read the Bible has to lead us deeper into love for people

If it doesn't, we're doing it wrong

That was my point in week 1 of the series

There are so many examples of ways the Church has gotten it wrong  
And things we're still trying to undo

Did you know that for centuries, the Church used the Bible to argue for race-based slavery?

For a long time, we interpreted certain passages to mean that dark-skinned people were cursed by God<sup>1</sup>

Today, we all can agree that kind of a reading of scripture is utterly repugnant

We recognize it as such because it *hurts people in the most brutal way imaginable*

## 5

As a follower of Jesus, I want to learn how to interpret the Bible in the way Jesus did

Doesn't that make sense that we would try to do that?

Because John, in his gospel, opens by calling Jesus "the Word of God"

This is where people get it wrong:

We don't worship **the Bible** as the Word of God

We worship **Jesus** as the Word of God

**He's** the ultimate statement about who God is

What I'm arguing for today is that, when we think about the Bible

What it says, how we use it

How we deal with passages that are difficult and confusing

Where our interpretations make a real difference in people's lives

In those instances, we need to remember this: Jesus is the Word of God

And that to follow him means to adopt his way of thinking about scripture

One that prioritizes love and care for people

Obviously, there are some people who don't like our signs  
They don't like that a church would make the claim that God's love is for everyone

Some of the negative messages that we've gotten, including one that I shared with the police, talked about how "people need to hear the truth"

But I'll tell you this

For every call we've gotten objecting to the signs

We've gotten at least one call, message, or email that makes it clear that people are experiencing the love of God through these signs.

I mean that quite literally.

Let me share from one email we received, from someone who identifies as LGBTQ and who grew up in the church – but who had been made to feel, and I'm quoting: "unlovable" in previous church experiences.

"I drove past your church on the way home from work the other day, and saw your signs that incorporated the Pride flag. I have never in my life seen that at a church and it honestly made me cry....your sign made me feel like maybe God can still love me and I don't have to go through everything alone. It truly just meant a lot."

If people want to know the truth about God...

I'd argue that the truth is this.

God loves people.

God cares about people.

That's the truth.

And it comes from the Word of God him-self.

Let's pray together....

Prayer: God, when we approach scripture from a place of conflict and confusion, help us to have the mind of Christ. Help us to remember that we are not debating issues...we're talking about people. People who matter to God. People Jesus died to save. Help us to read scripture through the lens of your love for us, and all people. Amen.

**By Joe Monahan, Medford UMC, Medford NJ**

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<sup>1</sup> The infamous “[Curse of Ham](#)” in Genesis 9:20-27 was an integral part of arguments for slavery.