

# “The Question of God: 5) How Then Shall We Live?”

a sermon by

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Text: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God” (Galatians 2:19b-20).

One of the legacies of the election of 2004 is the prominence of the discussion of “moral values” in our society today. A number of voters, when given a range of choices of the things that effected their votes, listed “moral values” as one of the deciding factors that led them to vote in the fashion they did. Many pundits and other observers have declared that “moral values” was the deciding issue in the election.

One of the problems with this, however, is that it is not clear what we mean when we speak of “moral values.” “Moral Values” is a subject that means different things to different

people. For some, “moral values” means opposition to gay marriages and abortion. Other people, when they speak of moral values, are more likely to think of the environment, better access to health care and education, and working to eliminate poverty.

## I.

Over the past several weeks we have dealt with the subject of “The Question of God.” The series began with a reference to a book *The Question of God: C.S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud Debate God, Love, Sex, and the Meaning of Life* written by Dr. Armand M. Nicholi, Jr., who serves as an associate clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and the Massachusetts General Hospital. In his book Nicholi places the arguments of Freud (an atheist) alongside those of C. S. Lewis (a believer).

One of the distinguishing differences between the two was the way each man viewed life. Ironically, both men suffered from depression. Freud finally treated his depression by the use of cocaine. C. S. Lewis responded in a different fashion. He suffered from depression during the first half of his life. The loss of his mother, the rejection of his father, and the cruelty of the head master at his first boarding school all played a role in this. But in his later life much of that depression lifted. Lewis attributed this change in part to his conversion to Christianity as well as to a change in the way he thought. Nicholi analyzed this change in Lewis as a profound change in priorities. For Lewis the first priority was his relationship to his creator. The second priority was his relationship to others. Lewis found in the teaching of Jesus something that changed his life. For him, hearing the words of Jesus, “Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it,” meant turning outward to God and others rather than turning inward to himself.

## II.

One of the most profound descriptions of the Christian life is found in the Apostle’s Paul letter to the church in Galatia. The context of this passage is a dispute in the church in Galatia. The question centered on whether a person had to follow the Jewish law in order to be a Christian. Paul argued successfully that the gospel of Jesus was an inclusive gospel open to all people--Jews and Gentiles. Paul was convinced that the risen Lord had appeared to him and commissioned him to preach to the gentiles. In this letter Paul speaks in the first person of his conversion to Christ. “...it is no longer I who lives,” he writes, “but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2: 20). For Paul God’s grace was not only forgiveness; it was power as well.

The Christian life, however, demands of us more than a good heart. It involves our minds as well. We have to think how we shall live as Christians. We do not always get ready-made answers on how we should live from Bible reading alone, from prayer alone, or even from good intentions. In many situations we do not have the choice between the simple good and the simple evil. That is one of the things that makes the whole debate about “moral values” so deceptive. As Reinhold Niebuhr once observed, “Most ethical choices are not between good and evil, but

between the lesser of two evils.” One of the most notable illustrations of this principle is war. No Christian could ever believe that war is a simple good, but Christians have participated in war. The whole “Just War” theory is an attempt to deal with the lesser of two evils. The whole debate about abortion is an illustration of this. Divorce is another.

How then shall we live as Christians? Here then are some of the guides that we have to help us to decide how we shall live.

## II.

The first question we should ask ourselves in seeking to live the Christian life is the question of how our lives reflect God’s revelation in Jesus Christ and in Scripture. One of the most important resources that we have in making ethical decisions is the presence of certain guidelines or rules. In the Old Testament The Ten Commandments serve as an illustration of this. In the New Testament we also find The Sermon on the Mount, as well as many precepts, sayings and summaries of moral advice. Jesus, when asked to name the greatest commandment, replied by saying, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart soul and might. That is the first commandment.” “The second,” he said, “is like unto it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

But the admonition to live in light of God’s revelation in Scripture goes far beyond any system of laws or rules. It supremely rests on the example of Christ. Thomas a Kempis conceived of the Christian life as the imitation of Christ. Martin Luther saw the Christian life as a response to the freedom given to us in Jesus Christ.

There is nothing more important for us in seeking to live the Christian life than the witness of the life of Christ. He admonished his disciples that the son of man came not to be served but to serve. His entire life was a witness to that. He associated with a tax collector by the name of Zaccheus. He befriended a woman taken in adultery. He reached out to the outcasts of his society “lepers, sinners, and prostitutes.”

Moreover, he bore that same witness in his death as in his life. In Gethsemane he prayed, “Not my will, but thy will be done.” On the cross he prayed, “Into thy hands I commend my spirit.” The Christian life always begins with the question: “How should I live in light of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ and in the Old and New Testament?”

## III.

Then, too, the Christian life always leads us into a world of human suffering and pain. Paul Tillich in his book, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, relates a story that came to light during the Nuremberg War Crime Trials, when a witness appeared who had lived for a time in a grave in a Jewish cemetery. It was the only place that he and others could live after they had escaped the German prison camps. During this time he wrote poetry, and one of the poems was a description of a birth . In a grave nearby a young woman gave birth to a boy. The eighty-year-old gravedigger

wrapped the child in a linen shroud. When the newborn child uttered his first cry, the old man prayed, "Great God, you have finally sent the Messiah to us for whom else than the Messiah could be born in a grave?"

The world that Jesus was born into was a world of human suffering. The Jews were an oppressed people living in terrible poverty. The ministry of Jesus began as a ministry of service.

Today, we are living in a city where the divide between rich and poor grows ever wider. That is what makes the ministry of this church so critical for today. This week *The Charlotte Observer* had an article on Bill Cosby, who spoke recently to a group of African Americans in Atlanta. Cosby observed that when he looked at the faces of black children he saw hope and promise. By the time they were in middle school that hope began to fade. By high school, Cosby noted, that hope had been replaced by anger. Bill Cosby's voice is an important witness to our churches and our society to eradicate the terrible divide that separates most whites from most blacks.

Some years ago on the campus of Princeton University I came across a sculpture by George Segal. It was commissioned after the shootings of Kent State University in 1970 when a group of national guardsmen gunned down a group of college students who were demonstrating against the Viet Nam War. The sculpture is entitled "The Sacrifice of Isaac" and it depicts the Biblical story of Abraham prepared to offer his son Isaac to be sacrificed. It reminds us of the terrible way that often we turn against those whom we love and of the great need that we have to be reconciled to God, to our neighbor.

#### IV.

Then, too, the Christian life inevitably leads us into the life of the church. Life in a fellowship of a believing, worshipping congregation is a major factor in moral decisions. The church is guilty of many mistakes and has made many errors in its time. But, regardless of its mistake, the New Testament includes life in the active and organized church as a part of the Christian gospel. The church needs to be reformed always but it is hard to imagine how the moral life of a community would flourish without the church. It is the fellowship of the church that allows a group of people to do what one or two individuals would never do on its own.

Harry Emerson Fosdick once told of a time he preached in a Wesleyan chapel in Nottingham, England, where William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army was converted. Today, tourists are still able to see the old back stairs of the church, where long before Booth had thought of the Salvation Army, he had brought up some of the most despicable people of the city to a small room where he used to pray them into a new life. Upon the walls of the chapel is erected a memorial tablet to William Booth commemorating the day he was converted there. The chapel has become a Mecca of pilgrimage for Salvation Army officers around the world. One day the minister of the chapel passed through the chapel and saw an aged black man in the uniform of a Salvation Army officer standing before the table with an uplifted face. "Sir," said the officer, "Can a person say a prayer here?" "Certainly," said the minister. "Then the old man dropped upon his knees and lifting his hands toward the tablet, said, "O God, do it again! Do it again!"

The prophet Micah tells us what God requires of us. Three practical, down to earth things that are real, and highly livable for these days: "...to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God."

May God grant us wisdom and courage for the living of these days. Amen.