

EXODUS 23:1-3

You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with the wicked to act as a malicious witness. You shall not follow a majority in wrong doing when you bear witness in a law suit. You shall not side with the majority so as to pervert justice nor shall you be partial to the poor in a lawsuit.

MATTHEW 7:15-20

Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit; nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, you will know them by their fruit.

MATTHEW 22:15-21

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. So, they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere; and teach the way of God in accordance with truth; and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?”

But, Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, “Whose head is this and whose title?” They said, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

MORAL RED LINES

Exodus 23:1-3

Matthew 7:15-20

Matthew 22:15-21

If you naively believed that we would have at least more than a year of peace from political ads invading our TVs like a swarm of hornets spitting venom and vitriol during our evening news broadcasts, you were sadly mistaken. The '22 primary season is in full swing and the rhetoric has sharpened with race baiting, insults and self-righteous claims of superiority. Arrogance is on full display. It is just a foretaste of what we can expect in the fall. Civil discourse on the issues is well beyond our reach. We are constantly caught in the disheartening debate between the lesser of two evils.

I don't know about you, but I have grown cynical about our politics. The more divided we grow, the more extreme we become. Dishonesty has always been a part of the political landscape to be sure—it goes with the territory. But since the middle is barely recognizable any longer, intentional disinformation (a euphemism for “lies”) has become the norm. It is a blatant attempt to create alternate realities which appeal to a candidate's base of voters.

What do you believe and who do you believe? And when the

answer comes back, “No one”, you know we are in trouble. But we really cannot realistically stay in a position of neutrality because there is so much pressure to take a stand one way or the other. And it creates an existential and moral dilemma we cannot avoid and like a leak in your roof, it seeps its way into the ceilings and walls of the decisions we must make.

I’ll give you a rather innocuous example. As you all know, I am a long-suffering Cleveland Browns fan. We last won the central division in 1989. So, in order to be more competitive with the likes of Joe Burrow and Lamar Jackson, the Browns signed quarterback DeShaun Watson who has 22 civil cases of sexual imposition pending against him. They gave him (hold your breath) a \$230 million guaranteed contract over five years.

As this news surfaced, a good friend of mine who is an avid Bengals fan texted me and asked if I would now consider switching my alliance and become a Bengals fan. I tersely replied with one word: “No!” Then he texted back with a question: “So is now winning more important than anything else?” he inquired. I responded: “Ah, the moral and ethical question of our age.” Indeed, exactly where do we draw the Moral Red Line?

Let’s look at a much more serious example with much graver implications. The Russian patriarch of the Orthodox Church, who also

happens to have close ties to Putin, has framed Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine as part of a metaphysical proxy war against Western values which bless so-called sins like gay pride parades. Are you kidding me? How are those even remotely equivalent to murdering thousands of civilians with bombs, shelling and assassinations and literally reducing their neighborhoods and cities to piles of rubble? Where, sir, is your Moral Red Line? Do you even have one? Pope Francis directly lectured him in a virtual meeting between the two church leaders and told him, "The church must not use the language of politics, but the language of Jesus."

The words expressed in our scriptures for this morning speak directly to this issue. *You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with the wicked to act as a malicious witness. You shall not follow a majority in wrong doing...or to pervert justice.* It is all about lies and hypocrisy, is it not? Politicians know that disinformation is a critical tool in wooing voters and swaying public opinion. The propaganda machine in Russia, blaming the West for starting the war in Ukraine, has allowed Putin's approval rating to soar above 80%. And since this disinformation campaign has been going on for 60 years with the onset of the Cold War and the formation of NATO, it is not surprising that this negative view of the West has been internalized by Russian citizens. If you tell a Big Lie often

enough, people will begin to believe it when it comports with what they want to believe. It's a powerful way to shift the Moral Red Line in your favor. And so, I ask you again, who do you believe and what do you believe? Jesus has some advice for us: *Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruit.*

And that brings us to our third scripture that raises the issue of loyalty which heavily influences where we draw our Moral Red Line. The Pharisees cleverly baited Jesus by presenting him with a false choice between fealty to Rome or fealty to God. *Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?* Jesus' answer to them is brilliant: *Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's.* The Pharisees stopped asking him questions after that because they knew he would out-dual them and make them look foolish.

Jesus' point was that everything we do falls under our relationship to God. Paying taxes is part of our civic responsibility to the communities we live in. How those taxes are spent is an entirely different question. It is unfortunate, however, that people often place loyalty to a person over and above their loyalty to God—and that is the very point where it devolves into hero worship. And when that occurs, it can lead to cultism embracing a

fanatical and rigid idealism that is totally immune from reason and objective analysis.

I only want to say this: no man is worthy of worship except Jesus Christ. There is no political or religious leader who deserves such adoration. It is true that life is full of ambiguity when it comes to Moral Red Lines. They do move back and forth. However, we must always know where our ultimate loyalty lies. Remember Jonestown where self-proclaimed messiah, James Jones, founded the People's Temple. And to protest government oppression of his religious movement, ordered his followers, blinded by their loyalty to him, to commit suicide by drinking Kool-Aid laced with cyanide.

Let us not drink the Kool-Aid. We will always be tempted by false prophets who spew lies, Big and small. But remember that they are known by their fruits. Jesus Christ was also known by his fruits—sacrificial love for the sake of the world. That is a man who deserves our worship. Ask him where to draw your Moral Red Line.

Rev. Thomas Dunlap May 1, 2022

