

Sermon Example #1

September 9, 2012
Pastor Joe Wittwer

Polarized!

#1—Religion

The Big Idea: Love your neighbor as yourself. But who is your neighbor? Anyone—including those of different faiths, politics and sexual preferences.

1. The Big Question and Jesus' _____.
Luke 10:25-37

2. The _____ in our culture.

3. The problem with _____.
Matthew 23

4. The problem with _____.
Matthew 11:27, John 10:7-9, 14:6, Acts 4:12, 1 John 2:23

5. Loving those who _____.

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Polarized!

#1—Religion

Opening:

It's an election year, and people are polarized. Republican vs. Democrat. Liberal vs. conservative. Right vs. left. Gay vs. straight. We're polarized—driven into different camps by angry, inflammatory rhetoric. There's lots of shouting, but not much listening. There's lots of spin, but not much truth-telling. There's lots of name-calling, but not much respect. It's not good for our democracy. And it's not good for the church or the cause of Christ.

Because gay marriage is on the ballot, I have been asked repeatedly about it. So I decided I ought to talk about it—but I wanted to do it within the larger context of my concern for our nation and the church. This is one issue that polarizes us, but it's an expression of the larger issues of religion and politics. So I decided to talk about it—more importantly, I decided to talk about how we should talk about it. How does Jesus want us as Christians to engage our culture? And how does He want us to talk with our neighbors about these polarizing issues?

That's where we're headed the next three weeks. Fasten your seatbelts!

Greeting:

Do you think religion should be allowed in public discourse? (Many people believe religion should be confined to the church and home—keep it private. Don't bring it to work and certainly not into the public sphere, like politics or education.)

Announcements:

Torches Discipleship—a new yearlong program for those 18–25 years old, info meetings today after 11:15 and 5:00 services in Room 200.

Newcomers' Connection—a free lunch on September 23 for those new to Life Center; please sign up at the Info Center.

Life Group leader rally next Sunday, September 16—includes lunch and childcare if you register by tomorrow; sign up online or at the Info Center. Catch a vision for groups to serve our community and our world!

9 AM service only: If you use Government Way as you leave here today, you will probably encounter SpokeFest participants on the roadway.

Please love your neighbor and drive like Jesus would!!

LifeRoads 10th anniversary. Ten years ago, we sent out our third church plant, called LifeRoads. Today, they are celebrating at LifeRoads and we wanted to take a moment and celebrate with them. LifeRoads meets in a refurbished theater behind Kmart on East Sprague. Here's a **picture** of Pastor Donnie Johnson with his wife Pam and their two kids, and Pastor Matt and Kristin Opland and their baby. Since May, they have **baptized** 29 people at LifeRoads. I'm really proud of Donnie and the folks at LifeRoads who are making a difference for Jesus in the East Central neighborhood!

Communion.

Introduction and offering:

When I was a freshman in high school and a new Christian, I was getting a haircut and asked my barber what he thought about Jesus.

He said, "Two things we don't talk about in here: religion and politics." End of conversation. In those days, religion and politics were considered taboo in polite public conversations. Compare that with this story.

ILL: At the March 24 "Reason Rally" in Washington DC, **Richard Dawkins** told 20,000 atheists and agnostics, "Don't fall for the convention that we're all 'too polite' to talk about religion. Religion makes specific claims about the universe which need to be substantiated, and need to be challenged – and if necessary, need to be ridiculed with contempt." So if you talk with someone with religious convictions, "Mock them! Ridicule them! In public!" Dawkins said, "I don't despise religious people; I despise what they stand for." In fairness to Dawkins, he believes all religions are false and harmful and we'd be better off without them. So if reason won't convince the religious to recant, then maybe shame and humiliation will. "Mock them!"

When **Ravi Zacharias** was asked what he thought about Dawkins' comments, he said, "Fine. Let him start in Saudi Arabia."

Dawkins is able to mock religious people here precisely because of religion—our notions of freedom of speech, freedom of religion and separation of church and state are all grounded in a Christian worldview. He mocks the very thing that allows him to mock it in public! By the way, my dear wife pointed out while Dawkins says to mock those with whom you disagree, Jesus says to love them.

Things have changed, haven't they? From not talking about religion in polite conversation, to openly mocking it. We're not in Kansas anymore, Toto. But I

think my wife is right. We ought to listen to Jesus on this one. How does Jesus want us to behave in a culture that is polarized?

The Big Idea: Love your neighbor as yourself. But who is your neighbor? Anyone—including those of different faiths, politics and sexual preferences.

Let's begin with Jesus—a story about Him and a story He told. This text will be our core text for this three-week series.

1. The Big Question and Jesus' story-answer.

Luke 10:25-37

25 On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

26 "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

27 He answered: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

28 "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

29 But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

30 In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. **31** A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. **32** So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. **33** But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. **34** He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. **35** The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

36 "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

37 The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

This expert in the Jewish law asked the Big Question: what must I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus answers his question by asking one of his own: "What is

written in the Law? How do you read it?” Jesus knew that the guy was an expert in the law, and he should know the answer.

He does. Love God with all you’ve got and love your neighbor as yourself.

“You’re right. Now go do it and you’ll live.” It’s one thing to know the answer; it’s another to live it. And this guy has an issue: “who is my neighbor?” It says that he wanted to justify himself. Many Jewish rabbis and scribes taught that “neighbor” meant your fellow-Jew, and you were therefore not obligated to love non-Jews. He wanted to define “neighbor” narrowly, as someone like himself: his race, his religion, his political persuasion. We’re all like this guy. We’re most comfortable with “our own type”—people who look like us, think like us, vote like us. We love those like us; we’re suspicious, cautious or even hostile toward those who are different. “Define neighbor,” he says to Jesus.

And Jesus tells a story—it’s a whopper! A Jewish man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho is accosted by robbers who beat him and leave him unconscious in the road.

Along comes a priest—like a pastor...like me. Everyone thinks, “Oh thank God. The pastor is here. He’ll help.” But the priest walks on by and leaves him there. “Pastor Joe!”

Then a Levite comes along—the Levites assisted the priests, so they would be like a church staff member—like David, our student ministry director who spoke last Sunday. Everyone thinks, “Pastor Joe must have been really busy, but thank God, David is here.” But the Levite walks on by too. “Pastor David!”

Then a Samaritan comes along—play sinister music here! The Jews and Samaritans were bitter enemies. A Jewish person coming from Galilee to Jerusalem crossed over the Jordan River and came down the east side to avoid going through Samaria. It wasn’t safe. Everyone thought, “Oh no, it’s over. This guy will finish him off.” But he doesn’t. He stops, helps the man, takes him to the nearest ER, and pays his bill to boot.

To put this story in our context, the man in the road is an American. Along comes a Republican—he doesn’t stop. Along comes a Democrat—he doesn’t stop. Along comes **a Taliban member**—he stops. Oops—wrong hero, Jesus! The Taliban member helps his enemy.

“Who was a neighbor to the man in the road?” Jesus asked.

“The one who had mercy on him.” He couldn’t even bring himself to say, “The Samaritan.”

“Go and do likewise.”

Who is my neighbor? Whoever is in front of me. Whoever is in need. Whoever. Friend or foe, Republican or Democrat, American or Taliban, Christian or Muslim, gay or straight...whoever. Love your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus redefined neighbor to include anyone, including those who are different from us. The Samaritan was a different race, country and religion; the man he helped was his enemy. But he showed mercy—that's love—and that's being a neighbor. Love your neighbor as yourself.

This will be our guiding light as we traverse this dangerous ground. Jesus says we must love our neighbor: period.

- We must love our neighbor when we think he is wrong.
- We must love our neighbor when we disagree with her.
- We must love our neighbor regardless of his political affiliation.
- We must love our neighbor when she worships a different god...or no god at all.
- We must love our neighbor when he or she has a different sexual orientation.

We must love our neighbor: period. This doesn't mean we have to agree with them—just that we have to love them. And love means treating them well, actively seeking to do good for them.

Today, we're going to talk about loving our neighbor when we have religious differences. And there are profound differences.

2. The new climate in our culture.

For many years, Christianity enjoyed a favored position in our nation and culture. For example, remember when public schools used to do **Christmas pageants**? We considered ourselves to be a Christian nation, even though we guaranteed religious freedom and many people were not Christians either in name or practice. Still, the vast majority of people considered themselves Christian. You could ask someone if he was a Christian, and he might say, "Of course; I'm an American aren't I?"

Those days are gone.

There is a new climate in our culture, and it's characterized by **pluralism, tolerance and ironically, an intolerant new form of atheism.**

Pluralism is "the existence of different groups within society." Religious pluralism means that different religions co-exist in our society: Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, and dozens of off-shoots of each of these. Add to that a growing number of atheists and agnostics. In fact, do you know which is the fastest growing group in America right now? The "nones".

(No, not the nuns...the nones.) More people are identifying themselves as having no faith, no religion, and no religious affiliation. They check the box marked “none”.

Religious pluralism means that all these groups exist in our society; but more than that, it means that we expect them to get along, to play together well. This requires tolerance.

Tolerance is “acceptance of different views.” The dictionary in MS Word defines tolerance as, “the acceptance of the differing views of other people, e.g. in religious or political matters, and fairness toward the people who hold these different views.” This raises a question: does tolerance mean that we accept these different views as equally true or right? No. That is not tolerance; that is lazy thinking. But some people want you to believe that tolerance is accepting every view as equally true and valid, or in the case of religion, every religion is equally true and valid. So when a Christian makes an exclusive truth claim (“Jesus is the way to God”), these folks get offended and call us intolerant. Of course, you can see the contradiction immediately. By getting offended and calling us intolerant, they are being intolerant. It’s a very weird deal—we’ve developed an intolerant tolerance. I tolerate you as long as you don’t say anything that offends my sense of tolerance.

I don’t like the word “tolerance”. Who wants to be tolerated, anyway? What we all really want is to be respected. I think respect is a better word, and a better way to treat people. And as a Christian, I believe that I owe every human being a measure of respect as someone who has been created in the image of God. **I can respect you, your views and your right to hold your views—without having to agree with them.** And if I treat you with respect, it means we can talk about our differences...respectfully. That’s much better than just tolerating you.

Religious pluralism isn’t new—as a nation that values religious freedom, we’ve always been pluralistic. What’s new is that we’re much more pluralistic than ever before. There are more options to choose from and Christianity isn’t the favored child anymore.

And tolerance isn’t really new either. “Live and let live” has been around a long time. What’s new is the intolerant tolerance—the idea that tolerance means accepting every view as equally true.

And what’s really new is the rise of **the new atheists**. I call them the evangelistic atheists. In the past, atheists and agnostics were pretty quiet. Now they’re loud and proud. But more than that, they are evangelistic—actively trying to convert people to their point of view. People like Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens are trying to

convince others to abandon their faith and join the ranks of the “nones”. Why? Because they believe that all religions are fundamentally wrong and harmful. They trace much of the evil in the world back to religion—they believe it’s harmful and we would all be better off without it. They also insist that science has made religion obsolete. We no longer need God to explain the world, or to be good. So if religion is harmful and useless, chuck it! The sooner, the better! And if mocking people helps them chuck it, then mock them!

This is the new climate: more pluralistic than ever, an intolerant tolerance and an evangelistic atheism. So are they right? Would we better off without religion?

3. The problem with religion.

Are there problems with religion? Lots! One example: many people have died in religious wars. I agree with our critics that this is a tragic fact. They would argue therefore that we’d be better off without religion. However, the last two world wars resulted in over 100 million deaths—more than all the wars (religious or otherwise) before them. Those two wars were national, not religious, in nature; but no one seems to be arguing that we would be better off without nations.

Are there problems with religion? Yes. Another example: there are so many of them! Which one is right? When you have many religions making contradictory claims, one could be right and the others wrong, or they could all be wrong. But they can’t all be right. So which is it? Is one right or are they all wrong?

Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and other critics of religion say they’re all wrong and we should abolish all of them. But are they right when they say we would be better off without religion? Do the problems outweigh the benefits? I would argue no, that the benefits far outweigh the problems. There are many good books on this subject, but I want to steer you to the one I just finished: *Who is this man?* by John Ortberg. Ortberg carefully traces the influence of Jesus through the centuries, and it is astonishing. Jesus has changed how we view and value the individual person, women, children, the weak and marginalized; our understanding of marriage and sexuality; education and learning; and politics. He introduced humility as a virtue; elevated forgiveness, and love of enemies; sowed the seeds that lead people to fight slavery, poverty, hunger and sickness. He is the biggest single influence in the arts and humanities. Read this book and you’ll see that the benefits far outweigh the problems.

Do you know who may be the most scathing critic of religion ever? Jesus.

When Jesus was on earth, he was loved and hated. Who loved him? Irreligious people, sinners, and outcasts. Who hated him? Religious people. Almost all of Jesus' conflict was with the religious. And Jesus was often scathing in his criticism of them. The most glaring example is in Matthew 23, where Jesus delivered his famous "woes" to the religious. For the sake of time, I'll let you read that on your own, but Jesus takes the religion of his day to task for not practicing what they preach, doing everything for show, majoring on the minors, and most of all for hypocrisy. He finishes his scathing indictment:

Matthew 23:33 "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?"

Gentle Jesus, meek and mild! Jesus was hard on religion, especially religious hypocrisy. We would do well to learn from our critics, especially Jesus—and much of what he says in Matthew 23 applies to us!

Let's talk for a moment about the big problem with Christianity.

4. The problem with Christianity.

In a culture that values pluralism and tolerance, the problem with Christianity is its exclusive claims to be the truth. The moment you say, "this is true" or "this is right", you are also saying, "that is false" or "that is wrong." Many people find this arrogant and offensive.

Does the Christian faith make exclusive claims? Yes. Here are four passages, two by Jesus and two by his followers.

Matthew 11:27 All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

John 14:6 Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Acts 4:12 Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

1 John 2:23 No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.

No one but Jesus can save us. He is the only way to God. These exclusive claims are what have fueled Christian missions taking the gospel around the world for the last 20 centuries. If Jesus were just one way among many, there would have been no missionaries, no evangelism, no attempt to spread the message. Let everyone find his own way. But that's not what Christians

believe. We believe that Jesus is the way to God, and no one comes to the Father except through him.

Does that make us arrogant? It could...but it doesn't have to.

First, remember that every religion, including atheism, makes exclusive truth claims. It's the nature of truth. Truth is exclusive. If $2+2=4$, then it doesn't equal 6 or 44 or anything else. So when Christians make a truth claim ("Jesus is the way to God"), they are no more arrogant than a Muslim who says "There is one God, Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet." Or an atheist who says, "There is no God. There is nothing but matter." Or a person who says, "I am right, you're wrong"...about anything! Every belief system makes truth claims that are exclusive. It's the nature of truth.

The big question of course is, "is it true?" This is very difficult to prove. Can I prove there is a God? No. Can I prove there is not? No. Can I prove Jesus is the Son of God? No. What I can do is look at the evidence and form a reasonable conclusion. One reason Christianity has not only survived 2000 years, but thrived and grown is that the evidence stands up under intellectual scrutiny.

Truth claims can be discussed and debated—and should be. But that is best done in an atmosphere of mutual respect. "Mock them," is not good advice; it only adds to the polarization of our culture. We need to listen to each other, learn from each other, and learn how to disagree respectfully.

5. Loving those who disagree about religion.

How many of you have ever had an argument with someone about religion? They could be Christians (do Christians ever argue with each other? All the time!); they could be of another faith; or they could be an atheist or agnostic. How do you handle the disagreement? One word: **love and respect**. We must treat others with love and respect, because they deserve that as people made in the image of God who are loved by God. Here are a couple practical suggestions when you find yourself butting heads over religion.

Listen respectfully. Often we argue because we haven't really listened and understood the other person. Failure to listen leads to misunderstanding and polarization. Listening is our best and only hope of understanding each other.

So ask questions and then listen. What do you believe? Why do you believe that? How did you come to that conclusion? Ask them to explain. Really try to understand them.

Try to find the common ground and celebrate that—it is a good way to respect other traditions. You can do this without sacrificing what you believe.

In fact, you can use the common ground as a platform from which to share the gospel. A great example of this is Acts 17. While visiting Athens, Paul was distressed to see that the city was full of idols. He discussed and debated with many people and finally had the chance to speak at the Areopagus—sort of like the city council of Athens. Here's how he began:

Acts 17:22-23 “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

Paul commended them for being very religious, and then found common ground—in this case, an altar to an unknown God—and beginning there, shared the gospel with them.

Listen respectfully. When you do, you'll find some things you agree with, celebrate those. And you'll find some things you disagree with.

Respectfully share your beliefs. Listening first usually wins you the right to be heard. Listen first, then ask the other person if you can share what you believe and then do it respectfully. Here's how Peter put it.

1 Peter 3:15-16 But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, **16** keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

Give an answer—but do it with gentleness and respect, and make sure your life backs up your message.

More than ever, it is important that Christians stand up and speak up. More than ever, we need to share the gospel with gentleness and respect and a clear conscience. In the words of Paul in Ephesians 4:15, “Speak the truth in love.”

What if after all that you still disagree?

Love them no matter what. Jesus said to love everyone from our neighbors to our enemies. Love means doing what is best for others no matter what it costs us. We do good for them, even though we disagree. We disagree agreeably.

ILL: Recently, a friend of mine who claims to be an atheist disagreed with me about something I said about God. At first, I felt my heart quicken and my mind race. I like to be right! I want to win—whether it's arguments or games.

By the way, one night this week I beat Laina at 3 straight games of Quarto and then skunked her at cribbage. I texted this to my kids and told them how awful I felt and what a bad husband I was. My son Andy texted back, "Bragger. You're not a bad husband, just a gloaty winner!" Ouch. Polarizing!

Back to my story: I like to be right and I like to win, so my heart starts beating faster. Then the Lord whispered to me, "You don't have to convince him, just love him." So we talked about the issue, but I did it with respect and love, and made sure the relationship is intact.

Later, I thought of an old story about a contest between the wind and the sun. The wind bet the sun, "I can make that traveler take off his cloak before you can." The wind went first and blew and blew, but the harder it blew, the more tightly the man wrapped himself in his cloak. When it was the sun's turn, it beamed its warm rays down, and before long, the man happily took off his coat.

The harder you blow, the more you argue, the louder you shout, the less likely you'll convince someone to change. You'll probably just drive them deeper into their current convictions. But the warm sunshine of love and respect may lead them to change. "You don't have to win the argument or convince them; you just have to love them."

I'm not called to win arguments...just people.

And the best way to win people is to love them and treat them with respect. Love them no matter what.

SERMON EXAMPLE #2

September 16, 2012
Pastor Joe Wittwer

Polarized!

#2—Politics

The Big Idea: Christians are to be good citizens who work for the common good and love their neighbors.

1. A Biblical perspective on politics

Jeremiah 29:7, Mark 12:13-17, Acts 5:29, Romans 13:1-7, 1 Peter 2:11-17, 1 Timothy 2:1-4

2. Give to Caesar: _____?

3. Give to God: _____?

4. Love those with whom we disagree.

Luke 10:25-37

September 16, 2012
Pastor Joe Wittwer

Polarized!

#2—Politics

Opening:

ILL: In the 2004 presidential election, partisan fervor visited the University of North Carolina. Two students, one supporting George Bush, the other supporting John Kerry debated over a unique political question. Who would Jesus vote for?

Jesus didn't reveal how he would vote, but we can be sure how he felt about the debate. When the exchange became heated, one of them slapped the other in the face. His opponent fell to the concrete patio, suffering a head injury.

What did Jesus have to say about politics? It might surprise you! Jesus said what is arguably the single most influential sentence in history about politics. We're going to take a look at that, and talk about how we as Christians engage in the political process. And of course, I am going to insist that we are called to love our neighbors even when we disagree.

Greeting:

What do you think Jesus said that is the most influential political sentence in history?

Announcements:

Life Group leaders—and those who would like to be! Leader rally this afternoon and peacemaker training on Saturday. Please stop in at the Info Center for details.

Newcomers' Connection next Sunday at 1 PM. Please sign up at the Info Center or online; it's a free event but we need a lunch count.

Financial Peace—a 9-week course from Dave Ramsey, begins on Wednesday. **Crown Financial** is a one-day seminar on Saturday. The website and Info Center have further information about both.

Transforming Servant Leadership—a new class taught by Jack Burns, leadership professor at Whitworth. This class begins on Sunday, September 30 during the evening service and meets for four weeks. You can sign up at the Info Center, or online at lifecenter.net.

Prayer:

One of our responsibilities as Christians is to pray for our civic leaders. Paul wrote to Timothy:

1 Timothy 2:1-4 I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone— **2** for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. **3** This is good, and pleases God our Savior, **4** who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

We are to pray for “all those in authority”, including our governmental leaders nationally, in our state, and in our county and city. We’re going to do that right now.

Introduction and offering:

That was Jena Lee Nardella, 2004 graduate of Whitworth University, and founder and executive director of BloodWater Mission, giving the closing prayer at the Democratic National Convention a couple weeks ago. What a wonderful prayer. She prayed for both President Obama and Governor Romney—and prayed the same good things for both. She prayed that all of us would conduct ourselves in the next 9 weeks in ways that would make our children proud. She prayed that we would be humble and listen to each other and treat each other with respect, even when we disagree deeply. And everyone said, “Amen!” Let it be! (**Offering here.**)

This is part 2 of *Polarized*. I am talking about three things that polarize people in our culture: religion, politics and gay marriage (which is an example of where religion and politics collide). Today, we’re going to talk about politics, and I am going to tell you who and what Christians should vote for. NOT! If that’s what you were hoping for, you’ll be disappointed. Instead, we’re going to see what the Bible says about politics and how we’re to be involved. We’ll see that Jesus introduced some revolutionary political ideas. And we’ll finish by talking about how we’re to treat our political adversaries.

What is politics? The word “politics” comes from the Greek words

- *polis* = city or town;
- *polites* = citizen;
- *politeuma* = commonwealth or state;
- *politeia* = citizenship.

We get the words “police, politics, policy, metropolis” and many others from the Greek *polis*.

Politics is “the theory and practice of government”. It is what we do to try to live together as citizens in a city, state or nation...or any other group of

people. There are politics in a family, in a church, in a life group, in a company, on a sports team. Any time a group of people tries to live together or work together, there are politics. What are the rules? Who decides? And who controls the resources of power and money? **Politics is what we do to live together.** Politics isn't bad—it's just inevitable!

So here we are in America—over 300 million of us—trying to live together—that's politics. How many opinions are there? At least 300 million. That's what makes politics so interesting, and so difficult. Pick any issue, any candidate—and there are lots of opinions. Sadly, many of the opinions are formed on false, or partial, or inaccurate information. **Not all opinions are created equal!** And many of these ill-formed opinions are being shouted, not spoken. Political parties know we have short attention spans, so they specialize in sound bites and talking points. And they have become spin masters, able to make their cause seem righteous and the other side's evil, or their candidate sterling and the other side's despicable. It's all very polarizing. What are we to do?

The Big Idea: Christians are to be good citizens who work for the common good and love their neighbors.

1. A Biblical perspective on politics

Our main text today will be Mark 12.

Mark 12:13–17 Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. **14** They came to him and said, "Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? **15** Should we pay or shouldn't we?"

But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked. "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." **16** They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?"

"Caesar's," they replied.

17 Then Jesus said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."

And they were amazed at him.

This is the last week of Jesus' life and his enemies are searching for a way to destroy him. Two political enemies team up: the Pharisees and Herodians. The Pharisees were deeply opposed to the Roman government in Jerusalem; the Herodians were in alliance with the Roman government. Red; blue.

Conservative; liberal. For Rome; against Rome. But they teamed up with the shared goal of trapping Jesus.

“Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we or shouldn’t we? Yes or no?”

This is a political question; let me give you the back-story. Rome levied many taxes on its subjects, but this particular tax was the census tax; in fact, the Greek word for “taxes” here is *kenson*, taken directly from the Latin word *census*. The tax was one denarius per year, and you paid it for the privilege of being alive and under Roman rule. One denarius was an average day’s wage for a common worker, so it wasn’t a lot of money. But the Jews hated this tax for a couple reasons.

First, it was a symbol of Roman oppression. Why should I pay you a tax just to exist? Second, it was paid with a coin, a **denarius**, that had an image of Caesar—at this time, Tiberius—and an inscription that read: “Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus”, and on the other side, “High Priest.” Remember, the Jews didn’t make images because of the second commandment forbidding making and worshipping images. And they didn’t believe Caesar was divine—they believed in one God, and it wasn’t Tiberius! So the coin itself with which the tax must be paid was offensive.

The Romans first levied this tax in AD 6, and immediately, the Jews rebelled. A freedom fighter named **Judas the Galilean** (he’s mentioned in Acts 5:37) said that taxation was no better than slavery (sounds like our American forefathers!). Judas rallied some fighters, stormed Jerusalem and cleansed the temple of foreigners. He called all the Jews to arms and to refuse to pay the tax. What did the Romans do? They sent in troops and crushed the rebellion, crucifying Judas and about 2000 of his followers. The crosses lined the roads as not-so-subtle reminder to pay your tax!

But the cry, “No tribute to the Romans” never died out and was very much alive in Jesus’ day. Judas the Galilean had cleansed the temple and refused to pay the tax. Now 30 years later, Jesus the Galilean has cleansed the temple, and they’re asking, “what does he think about the tax?” Is he a revolutionary?

So can you see the trap?

If Jesus says “No, don’t pay the tax,” the Herodians will report him to the Roman government and he’ll be arrested and executed for starting a revolt.

If Jesus says, “Yes, pay the tax,” the Pharisees will spread the word with the masses and his popularity and influence will end. Either way, they ruin Jesus.

Jesus' answer is brilliant. "Bring me a denarius." Notice that Jesus has to ask someone for the coin—he doesn't have one. "Whose image is this and whose inscription?" Caesar's image and inscription were on the coin because it was his. Coins were minted from his wealth; it was literally Caesar's silver.

So, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's." The coin belongs to him; give it to him. But it's the second half of the answer that is revolutionary. "And give to God what is God's."

Jesus separates Caesar and God, and that had never really been done before. In the ancient world, kings ruled by divine fiat. Kings claimed that their authority came from the gods, or that they were gods. There was no such thing as separation of church and state; in fact, no one had ever expressed the idea, until right now when Jesus does.

Historian Rodney Stark wrote, "In ancient civilizations the concept of a 'state church' didn't really exist because people did not distinguish between them as two institutions." Something would have to happen in the world for state and religion to be regarded as separate spheres.¹ That something happened right here: Jesus separated Caesar and God.

John Ortberg points out, "Ideas like individual rights, limited sphere of government, separation of the freedom of worship from the power of the state, and freedom of conscience would all be a part of reflecting on what Jesus meant when he talked about 'that which belongs to Caesar.'"² Americans owe a debt of gratitude to Jesus for our freedoms!

Jesus says that there are things that don't belong to Caesar but to God. You should give Caesar what is his: we'll talk about what that is in a moment. But there are things that aren't Caesar's. Worship doesn't belong to Caesar; ultimate allegiance doesn't belong to Caesar; the title Lord doesn't belong to Caesar. And most importantly, you don't belong to Caesar. All these belong to God.

Jesus separated Caesar and God. It would get him killed.

John Ortberg writes: "To Rome, the existence of the gods immensely enhanced Caesar's authority. To Jesus, the existence of God immensely limited Caesar's authority. The kingdom of Rome is not the kingdom of heaven. There is another sphere above Caesar's, to which everyone — including Caesar —

¹ (Ortberg, John (2012-07-31). Who Is This Man?: The Unpredictable Impact of the Inescapable Jesus (p. 108). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.)

² Ortberg, John (2012-07-31). Who Is This Man?: The Unpredictable Impact of the Inescapable Jesus (p. 113). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

will give account. An untried idea is being put forward here — one we might call the separation of church and state. The original opponent of this idea was not the church; it was the state.”³

When you read the history of the church, every time we’ve lost the separation of church and state, every time the church and state marry, the state wins and the church loses. The church has never done well when it is merged with the state; it operates best from the margins.

Tim Keller, in his message, “Arguing about politics”, says that in this single sentence, Jesus refuses political simplicity, political complacency, and political primacy.

- Political simplicity. They pressed Jesus for a yes or no answer, and Jesus refused to give one. The answer wasn’t that simple. Beware of political simplicity, of trying to reduce issues to simple yes or no’s, and then trying to make Jesus fit on one side or the other. It’s rarely that simple.
- Political complacency. We don’t withdraw from the system and refuse to participate. We give Caesar what belongs to him.
- Political primacy. Caesar isn’t Lord. There are things that don’t belong to Caesar. Politics is not the only way or even the prime way we solve our problems.

In one of the most influential single statements in history, Jesus affirmed the legitimacy of human governments and teaches his followers to be good citizens. But human governments are not the final authority; God is. Duty to Caesar is surpassed by duty to God.

So what is our duty to Caesar?

2. Give to Caesar: what are our political obligations?

Pray

We read earlier the passage from 1 Timothy 2 that called us to pray for kings and all in authority. Paul told Christians to pray for an emperor that was hostile to their faith! Lesson: pray for our president whether you agree with him or not!

Jeremiah 29:7 Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”

The prophet Jeremiah is writing to the Israelites living in exile in Babylon.

³ Ortberg, John (2012-07-31). Who Is This Man?: The Unpredictable Impact of the Inescapable Jesus (p. 107). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

They have been conquered and deported and are living in captivity in a foreign country. God tells them to settle in and make themselves at home; they are going to be there for 70 years. But He also tells them to pray for Babylon (their captor and oppressor), and seek its peace and prosperity. Even in exile, even in a foreign land, they were to pray and seek its peace and prosperity. The New Testament describes followers of Jesus as “aliens and strangers”.

1 Peter 2:11-17 Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.

I am a proud and grateful US citizen, and at the same time, an “alien and stranger”. The words mean I am a resident foreigner; think of a US ambassador serving in another country. Just like the Israelites were foreigners in Babylon, Christians are resident foreigners wherever we live.

ILL: In the Letter to Diognetus, written in the second century, it says, “They (Christians) live in their own countries, but only as aliens. They have a share in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their fatherland, and yet for them every fatherland is a foreign land.”⁴

Paul says our citizenship is in heaven, and our first allegiance is to God. Yet we pray and seek the peace and prosperity wherever we live. We are citizens of heaven, but good citizens on earth as well. And it starts by praying for our leaders and our nation.

Obey

Romans 13:1-7 Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. **2** Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. **3** For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. **4** For he is God’s servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. **5** Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.

⁴ *Early Christian Fathers*, ed. by Cyril R. Richardson, Touchstone, 1996, pg. 217, “Letter to Diognetus”.

Paul tells the Roman Christians to submit to the governing authorities—even though those authorities were hostile to their faith! He makes it clear that God has instituted the state to maintain order. The opposite of government is anarchy. So Christians obey the law. Peter echoes Paul's words:

1 Peter 2:13-17 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, **14** or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. **15** For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.

Submit for the Lord's sake—do it because you are a Christian—this is Christian citizenship. But what if the governing authorities are wrong? What if they command you to do something that violates your faith or conscience? Then we respectfully disobey. When the Jewish authorities told the apostles to stop preaching Jesus, here is their response.

Acts 5:29 Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than men!"

We obey God first. There are things that don't belong to Caesar. When the state is wrong, we obey God rather than men.

Pay

Romans 13:6-7 This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. **7** Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

Paul echoes Jesus here: give to Caesar what is Caesar's. Give everyone what you owe him. If you owe taxes, pay your taxes! Paul wrote this in an empire where they were taxed without representation. Here in America, we have a long history of tax revolt—starting with the **Boston Tea Party in 1773**—and we have a representative voice in our taxes. But like them or not, we're to pay our taxes. And we're to give respect.

Respect

1 Peter 2:16-17 Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. **17** Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.

Show proper respect to everyone. So much of our political discourse has become tainted by disrespect. It is one thing to disagree and say so; it's another to mock, ridicule, belittle and call names.

One of the books I read in preparation for this series is **Civility**, by **Stephen L. Carter**. Carter is a law professor at Harvard, and a Christian, and he argues in his book that our lack of civility is bad for our democracy. For democracy to work well, he says, we must love our neighbors. This means treating each other with basic respect. I said last week that we owe every human being a measure of respect as someone created in the image of God, loved by God, and as someone for whom Christ died. We don't have to agree, but we must learn how to disagree respectfully. We must be civil: show proper respect to everyone.

There are two more, and I have no verses for them because they are unique to our representative democracy, which didn't exist in Bible times.

Vote

We are privileged to be citizens in a democratic republic where we have a voice in electing our representatives and crafting our laws. I believe that we have a duty as citizens—but also as Christians—to make our voice heard. And the first way to do that is to vote!

In the 2008 election, 64% of voting-age citizens cast their vote. More than 1/3 of eligible voters didn't bother to vote. If you don't vote, don't complain! If you are not registered to vote—register. If you are registered—vote! And take the time to inform yourself on the issues and candidates so that you vote intelligently. I know—it takes a lot of time to be informed—but it's *our* country, and *our* state, and *our* city...and it's *our* duty to vote. Vote your convictions. As a Christian, your convictions should be shaped first by the Word of God, and not by public opinion polls. Know your Bible—and let God's values shape your convictions and your vote.

Speak up!

In this series, I'm arguing for civility, for respect, for love of neighbor. But that doesn't mean I'm arguing for silence! You and I have an obligation to speak up, to say what we believe and why, and to work for the causes and candidates we believe in.

ILL: Pastor Martin Niemöller was a pastor who at first supported Hitler's rise to power in Germany, and then opposed him and was arrested and imprisoned in a concentration camp from 1937-45. He wrote these famous words:

First they came for the socialists, and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak out

because I wasn't a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a Jew.

Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me.
Speak up!

Remember: slavery was abolished in England and America largely because of the work of Christians who spoke up. Later, the civil rights movement was led largely by Christians. Of course, some Christians opposed both efforts, to our shame. But that doesn't negate the fact that Christians spoke up and led the change.

Some people want to silence Christians; they say, "Keep your religion out of politics." But Christians have the same rights in our democracy as anyone else. We have the right to speak up and work for what we believe. You can't be true to either your nation or your God if you separate your faith and politics. This doesn't mean we are trying to force our morals or views on anyone else. It means we are trying to convince others of what we believe to affect change—that's how a democracy works. By the way, slave-owners used this argument—"don't force your morals on us"—against Christian abolitionists!

Someone may say, "You can't legislate morality." But isn't that exactly why we pass legislation—to say, "This is right and this is wrong." Legislation won't change anyone's heart, but it is a political acknowledgement of shared moral boundaries. If Jesus is Lord, he is lord of our politics too!

So speak up! And work for what you believe in. But do it respectfully.

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's: pray, obey, pay, respect, vote and speak up!

3. Give to God: what are our spiritual obligations?

Give to God what is God's? What belongs to God? You do. You bear the image of God. Just like that denarius bore the image of Caesar and belonged to him, you bear the image of God and belong to Him. Your life is not your own. You belong to God. He has first claim on your allegiance and love and life.

You don't belong to Caesar; you don't belong to the state. We have obligations as citizens, but you belong to God, and no one else.

Your first and highest calling is to be a follower of Jesus. Give yourself to God!

4. Love those with whom we disagree.

Last week we started with Luke 10:25-37, the story of the Good Samaritan, and I said that we have to love our neighbor. We must love our neighbor even when he is our enemy, or when he is a different race, religion, or political persuasion. We must love those with whom we disagree. If you don't love your adversary, you can win the argument and lose the person. But we have to remember that Jesus died for the person, not the argument. Love your neighbor!

I've said that you need to speak up for what you believe in, and do it respectfully. We also need to listen respectfully to those who disagree with us. This is very difficult to do when we feel strongly about something. Some of these issues arouse strong emotions: abortion, taxes, gay marriage, taxes, the economy, taxes. People get fired up about this stuff! And when one person gets fired up, others do too, and we usually end up in a shouting match and no one wins. Ask God to help you control your emotions.

And remember that most political issues are complex issues that won't yield to simple answers. They won't be solved by sound bites and talking points. We need robust and respectful political discussion. We need to listen to and understand each other. As Jenna prayed, we need each other to solve our problems. One side won't fix it. We need each other...so love your neighbor!

Sermon example #3

September 23, 2012
Pastor Joe Wittwer

Polarized!

#3—Gay marriage

The Big Idea: We may disagree about homosexuality and gay marriage, but we must still love each other.

1. What does the Bible say about _____?

Genesis 19:1-13, Judges 19

Leviticus 18:22, 20:13

Romans 1:18-32

1 Corinthians 6:9-10, 1 Timothy 1:8-11

2. What does the Bible say about _____?

Genesis 2:18-25, Matthew 19:1-9, Ephesians 5:21-33

3. The argument about _____.

4. Love your _____!

Luke 10:25-37

September 23, 2012
Pastor Joe Wittwer

Polarized!

#3—Gay marriage

Opening:

Today, I was going to talk about gay marriage, but that subject is so polarizing that I decided instead to talk about **puppies**. Everybody loves puppies! Just kidding...we're talking about gay marriage.

We're going to look at what the Bible says about homosexuality and marriage. We're going to look at the arguments for and against gay marriage. And of course, I am going to insist that you have to love your neighbor, even when you disagree. That means that you have to love me too—and some of you may not agree with me. Don't you wonder what I'm going to say? Me too!

Let's pray!

Greeting:

Are you a dog person or a cat person?

Announcements:

Newcomers' Connection: today at 1 PM in the Multipurpose Room.

Baptism class: next Sunday during each of the services. This one-hour class will prepare you to be baptized on October 7.

Sheridan mentoring kick-off: you've heard it talked about, you've helped clean up at Spokane and Mead schools, now is it time for you to be a school mentor? Find out at the meeting on Thursday at 7 PM.

This is a PG-13 message!

Introduction and offering:

This is part 3 of "Polarized". We are talking about three things that polarize people: religion, politics and gay marriage (where religion and politics are colliding right now in our state). Our culture has become increasingly polarized: Christian vs. atheist, Democrat vs. Republican, gay vs. straight, pro-life vs. pro-choice, conservative vs. liberal, Huskies vs. Cougars. We line up our slogans and sound bites and we lob them at each other in angry rants. We shout a lot and listen very little. To a great degree, we have lost the art of robust, respectful and civil discourse. I'm arguing that as

Christians, God demands that we love our neighbors, even those with whom we disagree.

I think it is fair to tell you where I am coming from.

First, as a follower of Jesus, I have to take the Bible seriously. So we are going to see what the Bible says about **homosexuality and about marriage**—let's see what it says. If you are trying to follow Jesus like I am, I hope you will take the Bible seriously too.

Second, as a follower of Jesus, I have to take the Bible seriously—and it tells me to **love my neighbor**. I must love my neighbor even when we disagree. Gay and straight—we must love each other. We are all just people. And I think that homosexuals and heterosexuals both want to be known as persons. We are each more than our sexual orientation; we are persons. Homosexuals are our neighbors and coworkers and friends. How many of you know someone close to you who is gay? These are people we know and love. And some of them go to our church (or other churches), and are trying to follow Jesus. Each person, regardless of sexual orientation, is created in the image of God, is loved by God, and is someone for whom Christ died. Therefore, each person deserves to be treated with love and respect.

So I want to start by saying “I’m sorry” to my gay friends. Too often, some Christians have failed to show you the love of God, and have instead treated you with hostility and even hatred.

ILL: Phil Yancey, in his book, *What's so Amazing about Grace?*, tells the story of going at a friend's request to the first gay march on Washington D.C. in 1987. About 300,000 gay rights marchers had gathered, and were greeted by a small but vocal group of Christian counter-demonstrators. These Christians were yelling inflammatory slogans at the gay marchers. “Faggots go home!” they chanted, and when they tired of that, they started, “Shame on you for what you do.” Or, “AIDS, AIDS, it's comin' your way.” In between chants, the leader shouted that God reserved the hottest fires in hell for sodomites and other perverts.

Among the marchers were at least 3,000 who identified themselves with various religious groups, including 1,000 from the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), a denomination that espouses evangelical theology except for its stance on homosexuality. When the MCC marchers drew alongside the Christian protestors, they stopped, turned to face them and sang, “Jesus loves us this we know, for the Bible tells us so.”

Yancey writes: “The abrupt ironies in that scene of confrontation struck me. On the one side were Christians defending pure doctrine. On

the other side were “sinners,” many of whom openly admit to homosexual practice. Yet the more orthodox group spewed out hate and the other group sang of Jesus’ love.”

Does the incongruity of that strike you like it does me? There are many sad stories like this one, and each time I hear one, I want to say, “I’m sorry.”

As followers of Jesus we take the Bible seriously. We take what it says about homosexuality and marriage seriously; we take what it says about loving our neighbor seriously. This creates a healthy tension for us that I will try to maintain in this talk.

I have often said that I am an equal-opportunity offender. Stick around long enough and I’m sure to offend you. Today, I may offend just about everyone. But please hear me out and hear my heart...and love me.

The Big Idea: We may disagree about homosexuality and gay marriage, but we must still love each other.

1. What does the Bible say about homosexuality?

It may surprise you to know that there aren’t a lot of verses in the Bible about homosexuality; it may *not* surprise you that all of them treat homosexual behavior as a sin. I am going to make a distinction between homosexual preferences and homosexual behavior; it is the sexual activity that the Bible treats as sin. I’m going to read all of the passages in the Bible that directly address homosexuality and make a few comments. I’m also going to tell you how some gay Christians interpret these passages. There are four groups of verses.

The stories of Sodom and Gibeah

Genesis 19 tells the famous story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Two angels are sent from God to warn Lot of impending judgment on the cities. Lot offered the two men the hospitality of his home, and here is what happened.

Genesis 19:4-11 Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom—both young and old—surrounded the house.⁵ They called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them.”

⁶ Lot went outside to meet them and shut the door behind him ⁷ and said, “No, my friends. Don’t do this wicked thing. ⁸ Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don’t do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof.”

⁹ “Get out of our way,” they replied. And they said, “This fellow came here as an alien, and now he wants to play the judge! We’ll treat you worse than them.” They kept bringing pressure on Lot and moved forward to break down the door.

¹⁰ But the men inside reached out and pulled Lot back into the house and shut the door. ¹¹ Then they struck the men who were at the door of the house, young and old, with blindness so that they could not find the door.

The angels lead Lot and his family out of Sodom before God destroyed the city. What was the sin of Sodom? Some argue that the sin of Sodom was a failure to be hospitable, and they point to the fact that Lot was willing to offer his daughters to protect his guests (an extreme version of hospitality that I find very weird). Others argue that Sodom’s sin was attempted homosexual rape, which is very different than a consensual relationship. They say the sin here is not homosexuality, but homosexual rape.

Whether it was homosexuality or homosexual rape, the Bible is clear that wasn’t the only sin in Sodom.

***Ezekiel 16:49-50** Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. 50 They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen.

They were guilty of many sins, but Jude suggests that homosexual sin was one.

***Jude 7** In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion.

The word “perversion” translates a Greek phrase that literally means, “going after other flesh”. Most scholars understand this as a reference to homosexual behavior, in this case, men wanting sex with another man.

Judges 19 tells a similar story about a Levite and his concubine who received similar treatment in an Israelite town called Gibeah. In both Gibeah and Sodom, homosexual behavior is viewed as sin—and it could be because it was rape. Let’s see what the rest of the Bible says.

The Leviticus prohibitions

Leviticus 18:22 “Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable.

Leviticus 20:13 “If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads.

This is very clear. In ancient Israel, homosexual behavior was forbidden and declared “detestable.” Some gays argue, incorrectly I believe, that what was being forbidden here is temple prostitution—that this was a religious taboo related to the pagan fertility practices of the nations around Israel. Therefore, they say, what is being prohibited are religious practices that have long since ceased and the passage is irrelevant to gay partnerships today. However, while the context contains some references to forbidden religious practices (such as offering your child as a sacrifice), it is primarily a long list of sexual prohibitions, including incest (sex with a family member) and adultery. This passage isn’t primarily about pagan worship, but about Israel’s sexual boundaries, that included adultery, incest and homosexual behavior.

Paul's description of the culture of his day

In **Romans 1**, the apostle Paul writes about the decadence of the pagan world in which he lived, listing some of their sins and predicting God’s judgment.

Romans 1:24-27 Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.²⁵ They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

²⁶ Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones.²⁷ In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

Paul describes homosexual behavior as shameful, unnatural, indecent and a perversion. Homosexuals argue that what these verses forbid is “unnatural” behavior—that is, for a heterosexual to engage in homosexual practice. That would be unnatural. They point out that women and men abandoned or exchanged natural behavior for unnatural; that is, they were heterosexuals who engaged in homosexual behavior. But, they say, it is natural for a homosexual to engage in homosexual behavior. However, I don’t believe that is how Paul is using the words “natural” and “unnatural”. He is referring to God’s created order rather than an individual’s personal preference.

Paul's other writings.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11 Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

1 Timothy 1:8-11 We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. We also know that law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

These two passages list behaviors that violate God's law and keep us out of God's kingdom. Homosexual behavior is included in both lists. There are two Greek words here.

- The words "male prostitutes" translate the Greek word malakoi, which means "soft to the touch", and among Greeks meant the male who played the passive role in homosexual intercourse.
- The words "homosexual offender" (1 Corinthians) and "perverts" (1 Timothy) translate the Greek word arsenokoitai, which means "male in a bed" and was used by the Greeks to describe the one who took the active role.

Thus, Paul forbids all homosexual behavior, either active or passive. Some homosexuals argue that Paul forbids temple prostitution or pederasty, that these words were used to describe sex with young boys, rather than consensual sex between adults.

Did you notice 1 Corinthians 6:11? "And that is what some of you were." Some of them had been homosexual, but they had been changed by Jesus.

I believe these Scriptures are clear that homosexual behavior is considered by God to be sinful and unnatural. As I have already pointed out, others disagree with me. Could I be wrong? Of course! But I think that is the clear and best understanding of those Scriptures, and how they have been understood for most of Christian history.

For some homosexuals, this ends the conversation. One man asked a gay friend, "If I believe that the Bible says homosexual behavior is sin, am I a homophobe?" "Yes." I don't think we need to jump there. I am asking you not

to end the conversation. I think one can believe homosexual behavior is wrong and not be homophobic or hateful.

While I believe homosexual behavior is sin, it is not the only sin, the biggest sin, or the unforgivable sin. We are all sinners, equally in need of God's grace and help. Did you notice that the list of 10 sins in 1 Corinthians included not just homosexual behavior, but greed, slander, drunkenness, stealing, idolatry and sexual immorality? Pride and idolatry are sins that show up far more often in the Bible than homosexual behavior. And I think it is important to understand that while homosexual behavior is sinful, homosexual feelings or temptation is not. It is the sex that is called sin—just like heterosexual sex outside of marriage is called sin.

2. What does the Bible say about marriage?

Simply put, the Bible's teaching on marriage and sexual relations is that God designed marriage to be a monogamous, lifelong relationship between a man and a woman, and that any sexual conduct outside those boundaries is sin.

In Genesis 1, God creates human beings "male and female" in the image of God, affirming the equality of the sexes. In Genesis 2, a second version of the creation story emphasizes the complementary nature of the sexes. The man is created first and is alone; he needs a companion. "It is not good for the man to be alone," God said. So God made ESPN and a remote. God put Adam to sleep and out of Adam, He made a woman. The sexes became differentiated: out of the undifferentiated humanity of Adam, male and female emerged. When Adam awoke and saw Eve, he broke into song. "Oo-la-la!" That's the Hebrew. It's the first love poem:

Genesis 2:23 The man said,
"This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called 'woman,'
for she was taken out of man."

Adam awoke to see his partner, Eve, and sang this song. Then this verse:

Genesis 2:24 For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

From "flesh of my flesh" to "become one flesh." Heterosexual intercourse is more than a union; it's a kind of reunion as the man and woman become one flesh again.

This verse, Genesis 2:24, describes God's intention for marriage. It is later quoted and affirmed by Jesus in Matthew 19 and by Paul in Ephesians 5. Marriage, as defined by God in Genesis 2:24, is

- **Heterosexual: a man and a woman.** A man...his wife; male and female.
- **Monogamous: one man with one woman.**
- **Primary: it is your highest human allegiance.** Leave his father and mother.
- **Permanent: you cleave—you are glued together.** Be united.
- **Intimate: the two become one.**

God's ideal is monogamous, intimate, permanent marriage...between a man and woman.

As I said, Jesus affirmed this; so did Paul. So both the Old and New Testament describe marriage in these terms.¹ It has been the standard for Christian marriage for 20 centuries.

Let's move from the Bible to the argument in our culture about gay marriage. How can we as followers of Jesus be true to what we think the Scriptures teach about homosexuality and marriage—and loving our neighbors?

3. The cultural argument about gay marriage.

I will try to give both sides of the argument—pro and con—and my opinion. Obviously, based on what the Bible says about homosexual behavior and marriage, I find it difficult to argue for gay marriage. But I respect the desire of my gay friends to have a lifelong committed relationship of love and I am sympathetic with many of their arguments. Here are a few.

Those arguing for gay marriage say that **it is a civil rights issue.** Gays have the right to be married just like anyone else. Those with partners want visitation and health-care decision-making rights like a heterosexual couple. They want the same inheritance rights, benefits and tax privileges as heterosexual couples. And they want to be accepted as married couples. I am sympathetic to any argument for civil rights—aren't you? Who wants to be against civil rights? One of my pastor friends, who is conservative theologically, is voting for gay marriage because he believes it is a civil rights issue. I respect that.

But I don't fully agree with it. Here's why. In the state of Washington, the 2009 domestic partnership law—called the “everything but marriage

¹ For a more detailed examination of the Biblical position, see John Stott's excellent article on homosexual partnerships, reprinted online at www.bibleteacher.org/hmarriage.html.

law”—placed domestic partnerships on an equal footing with marriage. This applied to both same-sex or opposite-sex domestic partnerships. Since 2009, registered same-sex couples enjoy all the civil rights of married couples—except for calling it marriage. For some, this is not enough. Representative Jamie Pedersen, the House sponsor of the bill, said, “Although we view this as an improvement that provides real and concrete protections to same-sex partners, it’s an inadequate substitute for marriage.”² This is why some opponents of same-sex marriage have said that it is no longer a civil rights issue; **it is about redefining marriage.**

Those arguing for gay marriage want **marriage equality**. They argue that a same-sex couple committed to each other for life should be treated equally with an opposite-sex couple committed for life. It’s about equality. Gays should get equal treatment under the law—and that should include marriage equality. Again, how can you not sympathize with an argument for equality? Who is not for equality?

But some opponents of gay marriage argue that **marriage equality is a myth**. We have always had boundaries around marriage. Four quickly come to mind:

- **Age. You cannot marry a minor (under-age).**
- **Relation. You cannot marry a close relative.**
- **Monogamy. You cannot marry more than one person at a time.**
- **Gender. You cannot marry someone of the same sex.**

Notice, “you cannot marry”. We have never been able to marry whoever we want; there have always been some boundaries. Opponents to gay marriage argue that we are redefining marriage by dropping one of those boundaries, and they fear that the other boundaries will soon fall too. The next to fall, they think, will be monogamy.

Supporters of gay marriage say, **“We’re not hurting anyone.** How does it hurt you if a gay couple gets married?” This is the “live and let live” argument. As long as my actions don’t harm you, let me be. And it’s true that allowing gays to marry won’t affect most of us individually or directly.

Opponents answer that **it will affect some people directly, and society as a whole.** For example, while pastors and churches will not be forced to perform gay marriage ceremonies, other wedding service providers such as photographers, caterers, wedding chapels, and justices of the peace can be

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Domestic_partnership_in_Washington_state.

sued if they refuse to serve a gay couple on the grounds of conscience. It has already happened in other states, and the providers have lost the suits.³

More importantly, opponents say, is that while gay marriage may not affect you individually, it does affect us as a society. Marriage is one of the foundational institutions of stable societies, and once we begin redefining it, we risk increasing societal instability. Also, a recent large longitudinal study at the University of Texas revealed that children raised by a mother and father fare better than those who were raised by same-sex parents.⁴ Opponents cite this study to argue that redefining marriage is not in the best interests of children or society as a whole. Supporters of gay marriage respond by citing other evidence that children do fine in same-sex led families.

So there are some of the cultural arguments for and against gay marriage. I know Christians who support it, and Christians who oppose it. While I sympathize with my gay friends who want to be married, as a follower of Jesus, I am constrained by my understanding of the Scripture, and can't vote for gay marriage. Some of you will agree with me, and some of you will disagree, which leads to my final point.

4. Love your neighbor!

We've got to love each other...even when we disagree. Followers of Jesus may disagree about how to vote on gay marriage given the civil issues involved. But we've got to agree on loving each other—it's the Great Commandment.

And we must love our gay neighbors and friends—even though we may think their sexual choices are not biblical. I think of the story in John 8, the woman caught in the act of adultery, and the question put to Jesus, "Should we stone her or not?" And Jesus said, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." And one by one, people dropped their rocks and walked away. Friends, we need to drop our rocks. And we need to open our hearts and welcome anyone who wants to try to follow Jesus, gay or straight.

When everyone had left, Jesus asked the woman, "Where are your accusers? Has no one condemned you?"

"No one, sir," she replied.

"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus said. "Go and leave your life of

³ http://preservemarriagewashington.com/pdf/WA_Consequences.pdf

⁴ For the full report, see www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0049089X12000610. For a summary, see this article from the Washington Times, www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/jun/10/study-suggests-risks-from-same-sex-parenting.

sin.”

Jesus forgave her completely. And Jesus called her to change and begin a new life. Jesus has given each of us full forgiveness, and called us to leave our life of sin and begin again. We are to do that for others: offer forgiveness and help them into a new life. But to do that, we have to drop our rocks.

If there is any place in the world where people ought to be able to find love, acceptance and forgiveness, it's here. I want our church to be a safe place for people trying to follow Jesus, whatever their sin, to find love and grace and help. I believe that Jesus is the hope of the world—that He can forgive and heal and change anyone. And I believe that the church ought to be the place where that can happen.

If you discovered that the person next to you, or in front of you or behind you was gay, what would you do? Would you be able to put an arm around them and assure them of your love and support? It's not a hypothetical question. We're here. We've all got our baggage. Let's drop our rocks and help each other follow Jesus.