

Hot Topics
“Ground Rules”
June 29, 2014

PRELUDE – Jesus Saves
Worship Songs – Finding Who We Are / For Your Glory

Intro Video

Feature – With One Voice

As Kitti said, today we’re beginning a new series called *Hot Topics for a Hot Summer* and over the next eight weeks we’re going to be dealing with seven issues, four of which have recently generated a lot of heated discussion and debate in our culture: *The environment, Islam, diversity and mental illness.*

- The environment – global warming, alternative sources of energy vs. economic prosperity.
- Islam – Muslim influence is growing not only around the world but also in our own backyard.
- Racial and ethnic diversity – geographic migration and immigration (both legal and illegal).
- Mental illness – not only have many of the mass shootings in recent months and years been carried out by people with severe mental problems, more and more “regular people” – including Christians – are suffering from some level of emotional or mental distress.

After we look at those four cultural issues from a Christian viewpoint, we’ll turn our attention to three biblical issues which are always hot (pun intended).

- Hell – does *it* really exist and does God really send people there?
- The Devil (and demons) – do they really exist and if so, what does that mean for you and me?
- The End Times – are we in the last days? Is Jesus about to return? Is Barack Obama or Pope Francis or Justin Beiber the Anti-Christ?

That’s what we’ll be looking at over the summer but before we get into those issues, we’re going to start with a message that I’ve titled “Ground Rules” ... which most of you probably recognize as a baseball term.

And most of you know that I am a huge baseball fan. Specifically, I am a huge *Kansas City Royals* baseball fan (which means that I am an *often-disappointed* baseball fan ... but that’s another issue).

And, if you know anything about baseball you know that it’s a very unique game. In fact, it’s one of the only games in the wholeworld where the rules actually *change* from location to location. Each team – whether amateur or professional – has the freedom to design its own playing field (within a certain framework, of course – you have to have bases and a pitcher’s mound and foul lines, etc). And that design affects the rules when the game is played at that location ... *which means* that one of the most important parts of every game is witnessed by almost no one ... because it happens before the game even begins.

Ground Rules Defined

Let me show you what I'm talking about. During a game last week between the New York Mets and the Oakland Athletics they actually showed video of what happened before the game.

Check it out.

Video – Ground Rules (1.0 min)

(B) Umpire talking

(E) Manager: "Have a good one guys."

Before every game (from Little League to the Major Leagues), there's a discussion of the ground rules: how the game is going to be played on and affected by that particular field.

And when I say every game, I mean every game. The next day, when those two teams played again, the umpires and the managers met before the game started and went over that same information – probably not in as much detail as what we just saw, but the same basic information was covered so that everyone would be once again on the same page *and* – and this is the important part – so that *there would be clarity when things come up in the heat of the completion*. Laying out the ground rules ahead of time minimizes conflict so the game can proceed as intended. When a batted ball hits the padding on the left-field wall and goes over the fence, for example, there isn't a big argument about what to do. Everybody already knows because it was spelled out in the ground rules.

And this morning we're attempting to do something similar. We're going to lay out the ground rules before we get into the series so that we're all (hopefully) on the same page when things get a little heated – as they will. I mean, I already know that when I talk about the environment next week, some of you are going to be offended by what I say or don't say. Some of you are going to be very uncomfortable when I talk about racial and ethnic diversity. Some of you are going to get upset over what I say or don't say about Hell and the End Times. That's why we said when we advertised this series – "guaranteed to offend someone every Sunday or your money back."

Not that my goal is to be intentionally offensive but these are hard issues we're going to be talking about. And unfortunately, there aren't any "thus saith the Lord" passages in the Bible that directly address the cultural topics. There's nothing in the Bible about Zoloff or carbon emissions or immigration quotas *which means* that God-fearing, Jesus-loving, good-hearted, well-intentioned people of faith are not going to see eye-to-eye on these things.

And some of the things in the Bible about Hell, for instance, seem incongruent with a God who is love. And a lot of the things the Bible says about the "end times" are unclear. So, God-fearing, Jesus-loving, good-hearted, well-intentioned people of faith disagree on these things as well.

Unfortunately, where there is disagreement, people quite often become disagreeable. See, I'm not the only one who is going to offend over the next two months. Some of you – especially if you're extroverted – are going to express opinions that others are going to find offensive. Some of you are going to be offended by people in your small group or family members and friends who sit right next to you in church who don't see it the way you do. And the result will be conflict ... or maybe even worse.

Maybe you've heard the joke about a group of Christians who got together and formed a church. Wanting to keep the main thing the main thing, they called it "The Church of Jesus." But soon there was dissension and division so a group broke away and called themselves "The *True* Church of Jesus." Not long afterwards, that church also split. The group that left called themselves "The *Only True* Church of Jesus."

It's funny but it's also sad. Hence the need for us to lay out – once again – the ground rules concerning how Christians are supposed to wrestle with issues that are not black and white in the scripture.

And I say "once again" because what I'm going to do today is to cover much of the same information that we did before last year's "Hot Topics" series. Some of you may remember that last summer we addressed God & Guns, God & Grass, God & Gosnell (the abortion issue) and God & Gays. (By the way, those messages are online in the media section of our website. If you'd like to know what I said about God and guns, grass, Gosnell and gays ... you can listen to, watch or read the messages).

But *before* we did that, I spent several weeks *talking about how we were going to talk about* those issues. In other words, I laid out the ground rules as they are spelled out for us in the New Testament. And I felt it was necessary to do that because ...

- a) Those were extremely controversial topics.
- b) It had been a good while since we had taken such a deep dive on such deep issues.
- c) I was concerned as your pastor that we prepared ahead of time for what might happen in the heat of the moment.

And I think that effort paid off because it set the tone for the feedback and the discussions that followed each message. And there was a lot of it ... and it was good.

And in hopes that this summer's hot topics discussion and feedback will be just as good, let's review the ground rules once again this morning. How are Christians – people who have come to the point in their life where they recognize they are sinners and that Jesus is the savior. That he died on the cross for them, and they've received his grace and mercy by putting their faith in him and not in something else – how are Christians supposed to think about these kinds of issues? And not only think about them, but how are we supposed to talk about them with one another? And not just talk about them, but how are we supposed to disagree with one another about these issues without becoming disagreeable and divisive and destructive. That's the question.

And, fortunately for us, almost every letter written by the Apostles to first-century Christ-followers deals with those exact questions and with that same purpose in mind: *how to be unified in heart and mind without having to be uniform in thought and convictions.*

Let me say that again because that's really important. In almost every letter in the New Testament, starting with the Book of Acts, reading the story of the first church and the Epistles, you would see over and over this issue comes up, "how do we deal with these questions about which we don't agree? How can we be unified in heart and mind without having to be uniform (thinking the same thing and having the exact same convictions about every single issue)?"

For instance, Paul wrote to the Romans (and this scripture was actually the inspiration for the song the band did a few minutes ago) ...

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Romans 15:5-6 (NIV)

To the Philippians he wrote:

Make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose. Philippians 2:2 (NLT)

To the Corinthians he wrote:

I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to agree together, to end your divisions, and to be united by the same mind and purpose. 1 Corinthians 1:10 (NET)

To the Ephesians he wrote:

I beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God.

And then he goes on to describe what that looks like:

Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love.

Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace. For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. Ephesians 4:1-4 (NLT)

The loving unity of believers is one of the highest if not *the* highest concern that's addressed over and over again in the New Testament ... which, I guess, is not too surprising given that one of the last things Jesus prayed on the night before his crucifixion was for his followers throughout the ages to be ...

"... brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." John 17:22-23 (NIV)

Unity matters to God. A lot.

But we don't all think alike – especially when it comes to the kinds of issues we're going to be talking about over the next two months.

- Politically, some of us are conservatives (our cars don't even make a left turn); some are liberals. Some of us can't go an hour without a Fox News fix; some of us are hardwired to MSNBC. That's just how we look at these things.

- Some of us grew up in fundamentalist churches with very staunch convictions believing that God had an opinion about *everything* and we needed to get in line. Some of us grew up as agnostics or atheists and our convictions were shaped by whatever *we* thought was right or wrong in the moment, we didn't think God existed or really cared.
- By personality, some of us are naturally drawn to black and white thinking. We go crazy without rules and structure and order. Others of us, just by the way we were wired up at birth, we can't help but see the gray. We hate being boxed in by anything. It's just the way we're wired up.

All of these factors taken together mean that we all see the world – and issues – very differently. So, how do we maintain the unity of the Spirit when there is such a lack of uniformity?

Well, again, that's where the ground rules come in. I think there are three. There may be more, but three is all we have time for this morning. And I think if we get these things right we'll be a long way down the road. I'll give you all of them at once and then we'll look at them individually.

1. Never forget whose side you are on.

2. Recognize – and respect – the freedom of others in “matters of conscience.”

3. Believe that loving one another is more important than being right.

Ok, let's take a look at these one at a time.

The Side We Are On

And let's start with the first one: *never forget whose side you are on* in the middle of all these issues.

And I know some of you are thinking, “Well, that's exactly right, Rick. If all the liberals would just recognize that they're on the wrong side, things would be a lot better in the church and in the world.”

Uh, that's not what I'm saying because as followers of Jesus we're *not* first and foremost Republicans or conservatives or Libertarians. And we're not first and foremost Democrats or moderates or liberals. We're first and foremost, if we're Christians, on the side of Jesus. Specifically, it's very clear in the scripture, our primary concern is to be *His Kingdom*; not the kingdoms of this world.

On the day he was crucified, John tells us that ...

Pilate summoned Jesus and asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?”

“Is that your own idea,” Jesus asked, “or did others talk to you about me?”

“Am I a Jew?” Pilate replied. “Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?”

Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent

my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But my kingdom is from another place.”

John 18:33-36 (NIV)

And if you are a Christian, a follower of Jesus, your kingdom is from another place, not this place.

Now, don't hear what I'm not saying. I'm not saying it's wrong to have opinions or convictions. It's not wrong to vote Republican ... or Democrat ... or Libertarian ... or whatever. I'm not even saying "it's wrong to become a politician and run for office and try to bring about change in some issue." I'm just saying don't be fooled into believing that any particular political or social or economic power structure of this world is "the side" that followers of Jesus are to be on. Gosh, I could say that 100 times. Don't fall for that lie. Nothing in this world is "the side" that followers of Jesus are to be on.

So, what does it mean for us to be on Jesus' side first and foremost? Well, let's go back to that song and the scripture on which it is based.

Remember what Paul wrote?

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Romans 15:5-6 (NIV)

Notice that when Paul tells believers to be of one mind and one voice, he's not talking about issues – cultural or biblical. He's not saying, "make sure you all have the same opinion on global warming" or "make sure you all have the same opinion on how Hell works." What he's saying is, have the same opinion about bringing glory to God. In fact, the Greek word he uses that gets translated "one mind" is *homothumadon* ... which is the combination of two words:

- *homo*, meaning "same"
- and *thumos* which is a volatile word that can describe the way one might fly off the handle in angry passion, raging against the machine or the man or whatever it is that angers you. It's fiery passion. It's intense.¹

Now, notice that what Paul is talking about here in using the word *thumos* isn't intense anger about an issue or a cause (which is so often where we see *thumadon* in this world, even among Christians). Instead, what Paul is talking about here is another kind of passion: to see God glorified in this world. So, here's the secret, when the "issues" become secondary to that goal ... that's how unity is maintained even though there is not uniformity. We're unified in our passion toward Jesus.

Specifically, I might not be right about global warming. You might not be either. But if the primary passion of our hearts is for Jesus to be honored and loved and respected in this world, then that issue cannot divide us, even if we're at completely opposite ends of the spectrum.

So, that's the first ground rule: never forget whose side you're on. If you're a Christian, you're on Jesus' side – not the liberal side, not the conservative side, not the fundamentalist side, not the moderate side or any other side you can think of. Never forget that you're on Jesus' side.

Matters of Conscience

The second ground rule is to recognize and respect the freedom of others in “matters of conscience.”

Here’s what I mean by that: whenever a follower of Christ has to make a moral decision or a moral judgment about issues in their life it will typically fall into one of three categories:

The first category is what I’d call matters of divine absolutes ...

... where God has given a clear commandment (i.e. “do not steal,” there’s no debate about that; “remember to keep the Lord’s Day set apart from all the others”)

There are matters of wisdom ...

... where God invites us to use our brains and evaluate and choose the most prudent course of action.

And there are matters of conscience ...

... where God gives us great freedom to develop our own convictions of right and wrong based on (and this is extremely important to understand) *what we believe to be the most important part of His revealed truth for our situation.*

Just to be clear, this is not the same thing as making up your own rules as you see fit. This is evaluating what God has already said and done in the scripture, what God has already made black and white in the scripture, and then inviting Him to impress on you what of that revelation you should give the most weight to in this area that’s not quite so clear.

How this works out in practical day-to-day living is explained in great detail in the 14th chapter of Paul’s letter to the first-century church in Rome. Among those believers there was a great difference of opinion as to whether it was OK for Christians to eat meat or whether they should be vegetarians. In addition, some believers felt that it was important to celebrate the Jewish festivals and holy days, while others did not. And some thought they should totally abstain from wine, while others did not.

Here’s what Paul told them about all three of those issues. It’s amazing that God saved this for us to read:

One person’s faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. Romans 14:2-3 (NIV)

And he has accepted them because of their faith in Christ – not because they got it right on what to eat or not eat.

Paul continues ...

Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.

Romans 14:5-6 (NIV)

As long as you have weighed out the issues and you feel that you are acting consistently with what God has impressed on you as being the most important part of what he has already revealed in the scripture, then act in faith, Paul says, and be thankful.

And then he concludes with two specific exhortations, one to each group in the debate.

To those who don't feel good about eating meat or drinking wine he writes ...

I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean.

Romans 14:14 (NIV)

And to those whose consciences were not bothered Paul wrote ...

All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall. So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God.

Romans 14:20-22 (NIV)

Now some Christians interpret this to mean that “if another believer objects to what I’m doing, then I shouldn’t do it.” But, from the context, that’s not what Paul is saying.

The key to understanding what Paul is talking about is that final sentence: *what you believe about these things, keep it to yourself*. Don’t make a big deal out of this in front of other people because it’s not that big of a deal in the grand scheme of things. These are issues on which Christians can disagree and still be smack in the middle of God’s will for their lives, so don’t make them the focal point or a test of character or spiritual maturity.

And don’t try to convince another believer who doesn’t feel the freedom that you do *to do what you do* because they would have to violate their conscience ... and you would be leading them into sin!

Bottom line, if you have a clear conscience about something that is not a “thus saith the Lord” issue or a wisdom issue, then do so. And if you do not, then don’t. But do not judge those who have come to a different conviction because it’s not your place (as Paul says).

Of course, the key factor in all of this is what shapes and forms our conscience. A Christian conscience isn’t developed by trying to become OK with whatever we have to do to survive in this world. A Christian conscience is developed by applying the idea that God’s Kingdom (life lived in the way He said it should be lived and will be lived) is “near and now” as much as it is “far and future” to whatever issue in whatever circumstance we find ourselves.

And I’ll say more about that in upcoming weeks.

So, ground rule number one ... remember whose side you're on (if you are a Christian you're on Jesus' side); number two ... recognize and respect the freedom of others in matters of conscience ...

Love Trumps Everything

... and number three (which is very, very hard for some of us and I will stand at the front of the line on this): *believe that loving others is actually more important than being right.*

That's not to say that being right isn't important. It is – especially when there is a “thus saith the Lord” or we're talking about a matter of wisdom. But even when we are talking about a direct command of God or a matter of wisdom, loving others is more important than being right about that command or wisdom.

And I know some of you are thinking “you're compromising. You're just watering down the truth. How can you say such a thing, Rick?”

Well, I didn't say it. Jesus did. And we talked about it a couple of weeks ago. Remember the story about the Pharisee who came to him and said, “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law”? That's not much different than asking, “Jesus, if we had to be right about just one thing out of all the scripture, what would it be?”

Remember what Jesus said? “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind and all your strength. And ... and ... love your neighbor as yourself.”

Love is more important than anything else – including being “right” about any issue; even the “thus saith the Lord” issues.

But what does that look like in real life?

I've said on several occasions that one of my favorite Christian leaders of all time was John Wesley. I love his approach to so much of the Christian life but nothing as much as the way he approached handling differences of opinion among Christians.

I went into great detail about that when I laid out the ground rules last year so I won't do it again today. Instead I'll just share a few quotes from a sermon he delivered almost 350 years ago; a sermon in which his concern was the same as ours: “what does it mean for people of different opinions to be united in Christ instead of divided by their labels?” ... which was a huge issue in his day.

Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without doubt, we may. In this [love] all the children of God may unite, even though they retain these smaller differences.

Then he goes on to say, in essence, if you love God and you love your neighbor as yourself, then we're good even though we may have differences of opinion. “Your heart is right [with mine], as my heart is with your heart.”

And in the words of an Old Testament king by the name of Jehu, “If it be, give me your hand.”

By this I do *not* mean, "Be of my opinion." You need not. I do not expect or desire it. Neither do I mean, "I will be of your opinion." You keep your opinion and I will keep mine, and as firmly as ever. You need not endeavor to come over to my way of thinking, or bring me over to yours. I do not desire you to dispute those points, or to hear or speak one word concerning them. Leave all opinions alone on one side and the other: only "give me your hand."

By this I *do* mean first of all, love *me*.

Love me with a very tender affection, as a friend that is closer than a brother, as a brother in Christ, a fellow citizen of the [kingdom of God], a fellow soldier engaged in the same warfare, under the same Captain of our salvation.

Love me so as to think no evil of me. Love me with a love that covers all things, is always willing to think the best, to put the [most positive interpretation] on all my words and actions.

Secondly, by "give me your hand" I mean *commend me to God in all your prayers*.

Wrestle with Him on my behalf, that he would speedily correct what he sees amiss, and supply what is lacking in me. Beg of him that my heart may be more as your heart, more right both toward God and toward man.

Thirdly, by "give me your hand" I mean *provoke me to love and to good works*.

Follow up your prayer by speaking to me in love whatever you believe to be for my soul's health. Encourage me in the work that God has given me to do and instruct me how to do it more perfectly. O speak and spare not, whatever you believe may assist, either to the amending of my faults [or] the strengthening of my weakness.

Finally, by "give me your hand" I mean *walk with me*.

So far as in conscience you can (retaining still your own opinions, and your own manner of worshipping God), join with me in the work of God. And let us go hand in hand."

Communion

Now, there's more to this sermon ... including Wesley's repeated clarification that what he's advocating does not mean abandoning our personal convictions and beliefs. In fact, he recommends that all believers should be clearly convinced that their manner of worshipping God is both scriptural and rational; that, in the entire world there are no better particular views and forms of worship than his or hers.

But his main point is that in spite of all our differences, we believers have in common so many deep realities and can offer one another so many life-giving blessings that have nothing to do with the political or cultural issues of our day. And these things – what we have in common and what we can do for one another – are the things that unify us and the things to which we should give most of our attention and energy.

And I'm thankful that in many ways we already are that kind of community here at NHCC. But I long for that to become even truer of us. And I long for you to be part of that and to experience that in your life – and not just as you relate to brothers and sisters in this congregation but in your own family or where you work or go to school.

So this morning we're going to close with a time of communion – a time of remembering that what binds us together isn't our opinions; it's our common experience of grace through what Jesus did on the cross for us. That's why we take the bread and the cup – they remind us of his body and blood that atoned for our all of sins.

So, let me pray and then as you're ready come and take communion and then have a seat.

Let's pray ...

1. Let's remember whose side we're on – we're first and foremost on Jesus' side; we're first and foremost about bringing him glory together with other believers.
2. Let's recognize and respect the freedom of others in matters of conscience.
3. And let's believe that loving people is more important than being right.

Communion / "Lead Me to the Cross"

CLOSING COMMENTS

1. Next week's message ... the environment.

Endnotes

ⁱ See <http://elusivebread.wordpress.com/2009/02/03/ecph/>