

Progressive Christianity 3: What Are We Called To Do?

[Galatians 2:15-16](#)

[James 2:14-17](#)

[Galatians 5:13-14](#)

[Luke 7:37-39](#)

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We search for understanding, and we believe that there is more value in questioning than in absolutes.

We work for peace and justice among all people.

The choir's anthem gives us a clear answer to the question, "What does the Lord require but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God?" This guidance comes from the Prophet Micah, chapter 6, in the Hebrew Bible (v. 8). The prophets are always concerned about ethical living. What we *do* matters.

And Jesus follows in that prophetic tradition. The Pharisees in Luke are quick to pass judgment on the woman with the alabaster jar, but Jesus looks at the situation more deeply. He observes the woman. He does not base his judgment on her reputation. In fact, he praises her for her actions. Jesus says to Simon the Pharisee: "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love" (7:44-47). The important thing to Jesus is the woman's behavior, not her reputation. What we *do* matters.

We know that Paul traveled to Jerusalem and visited there with Peter and James, the brother of Jesus. Peter and James were the leaders of what would be called the Jerusalem Church after Jesus died, and after Pentecost. Paul seems to be at odds with the teaching of James. An inquisitive reader of the New Testament will see one piece of writing in relation to another and ask questions.

Asking questions is part of what it means to be a Progressive Christian. (Today we are looking at the 5th and 6th tenets of Progressive Christianity.) Some people have no problem hearing one scripture read one week and another read another week. But if we put it all together, we will come up with some questions. If you noticed, the point in our first reading from Galatians today is nearly opposite from the point in the second reading from the Book of James. In Galatians, Paul says a person is "justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ" (2:16). But James says, "Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (2: 17). Which is true? Is our righteousness measured by how much faith we have in Jesus Christ, or is it measured by our actions being in line with God's

commandments? Faith vs. works....This is one of Paul's big sermon topics. And he always comes down on the side of faith being more important than works.

There are arguments in support of Paul's focus on faith, and there are arguments against Paul's focus on faith (and his dismissal of works). Martin Luther was a great supporter of Pauline thinking, that we are not justified by works, rather we are justified by faith. And this view made a lot of sense in the Protestant Reformation, which Luther led. The Roman Catholic Church had been permitting people to purchase indulgences from the Church in order to gain forgiveness for their sins. Martin Luther disagreed; he said you couldn't earn salvation. Luther moved the book of James out of his Bible into the appendix of his translation because of its focus on *works*. (Did you know you could do that?) He said it was an "Epistle of Straw" (http://www.catholicbridge.com/catholic/faith_vs_works.php).

At the time of Paul, early Christians were separating themselves from Jewish communities, and then a little later, when the Gospels were written, they were becoming even more separate. At first, all the followers of Jesus were Jewish, and the community led by Peter and James in Jerusalem was Jewish. But Paul opened the movement of belief in Christ to non-Jews. Paul was the apostle to the gentiles. And he maintained that people didn't have to become Jews first in order to accept Christ. He opened the door to what we now call the Church. (And we think that was a good thing.) But many authors today look at the way Paul negated "the law" and today say that he was overly critical of Judaism. Although Paul was a Jew, he was a zealous early convert to the Jesus movement. In his zeal, some say, he put down his former faith. By "the law" Jews mean the Torah, with God's commandments for living in faithful covenant with God. This is of ultimate importance in our Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible. To negate the importance of God's loving covenant with the people, many would call anti-Judaic. It isn't anti-Semitic, which refers to being against the Jewish race. But anti-Judaic writing has led to some anti-Semitic attitudes and terribly hurtful behaviors over history between Christians and Jews.

The tendency to follow Paul's tone and say that the Old Testament is legalistic and the New Testament is loving, presents a problem. We call this supersessionism, the idea that the New Testament supersedes the Old Testament, the idea that the law is bad and that the grace of Jesus Christ is good. Although many of us grew up with this, I believe, this is an oversimplification of our Bible.

If we dare to question the interpretations of the Bible, if we dare to question our faith and what we believe, we have to wrestle with what we think about Paul's writing. When I contrast it to James' passage, I have to say, I resonate more with James. See what you think. James says faith is nothing unless you act ethically, according to God's laws. That seems more consistent with the Prophets.

Now I am grateful that Paul comes back in chapter 5 of Galatians with the essence of the law as love. This sounds like Jesus. Loving our neighbor as ourselves is the point of God's law for humankind. Imagine if all people in the world today loved their neighbors: Israelis and Palestinians, Sunni and Shiite Muslims, black and white Americans, gay and straight neighbors.

Love is what the story of the woman with the alabaster jar is all about. Her actions demonstrated great love.

But look at how Luke chose to write that story. In Mark's version of the anointing of Jesus, the woman was no sinner, and the Pharisee was a leper. But in Luke, Simon was an educated Pharisee, and the woman was portrayed as a prostitute. Luke makes Pharisees look bad. And throughout many passages in Matthew and John, and sometimes in Luke, the stories in the Bible juxtapose the Pharisees (the bad guys) with Jesus (the good guy). But the Pharisees, remember, are the leaders of the Jewish temple. They are the scholars. Why do the New Testament writers make them look bad?

If we are willing to ask questions, we might find that one of the purposes for writing against the "law" and against "the Pharisees" is to elevate Christianity above Judaism, even in the earliest years of the Jesus movement before Christianity was a world religion.

This is a taste of reading the bible with a critical eye. Nobody says you have to do this. But this is what progressive Christian scholars do. A very well regarded theologian, Rosemary Radford Ruether, since as early as 1972, has written about the ways the New Testament itself has fostered anti-Judaic prejudice in the last two thousand years (*Liberation Theology*, "Judaism and Christianity: A Dialogue Refused," 72-82, 1972).

I love the Bible—the whole Bible—because it speaks of many understandings of God and faith. When I read Paul critically, I conclude that he was very opinionated and quite defensive about his newfound faith. I am grateful that he cared enough to travel the Mediterranean, suffering hardship, and finally martyrdom, to spread his love of Jesus. Without Paul we would not have the Church. But I recognize some consequences of Paul's writing that have been seriously detrimental to understanding among people of world religions. Even Luke's writing—we believe Luke was a gentile—is hard on the Jews. It's good to remind ourselves that Jesus was a Jew! And the teachings of Jesus are all about the commandments of loving God and loving neighbor, teachings of the Jewish Bible. And in the Christian Testament, stories of Jesus are examples of how Jesus came to fulfill the law.

It is important to me that our Church today work for peace and justice among all people. Part of asking questions in our faith community is to be self-critical. How is our expression of faith hurtful to other people? How do our teachings foster peace and forgiveness?

Perhaps we can be self-critical and look at the history of Christianity and see that Christians have persecuted Jews not only in the Holocaust, but since the Bible was written and down through the ages in papal decrees, in the Crusades, in pogroms, and even in the writing of Martin Luther. We are products of a culture of "us and them," but our questions today can explore new ways of thinking to break down these ancient walls that divide.

Perhaps one way for us to foster peace and justice in our personal relationships is to be more forgiving, as Jesus was with the woman with the alabaster jar. Perhaps we should not base our judgments on stereotypes, but instead on behaviors.

There was a cartoon in *Christian Century*: a couple is leaving church, and the man says to the woman, "How can I love my neighbor when I don't even like my friends?"

You may have recently heard the name Elizabeth Hesselblad. She was a poor Swedish Lutheran girl. She immigrated to the United States as a teenager to help support her family. In New York, she attended nursing school, cared for many Catholic patients, and converted to Catholicism. She was always committed to Christian unity. She went to Rome on a pilgrimage and created a Catholic order around the legacy of Saint Bridget of Sweden. She became its Mother Superior. During World War II, she and her sisters hid Jews in their convent from 1943-44. She created a make-shift synagogue in the convent where the Jewish people in hiding could pray. She never tried to convert the Jews to Christianity. Following the war, a Jewish organization named her "Righteous among the Nations," for saving Jewish lives during the Holocaust. She worked for the poor, against racism, and for peace among religions. Elizabeth died in Rome in 1957, at 87 years old. This year, on June 5th, Pope Francis canonized Elizabeth as a new saint. In her words: "Our religious houses must be formed after the example of Nazareth: prayer, work, sacrifice. The human heart can aspire to nothing greater."

What are we called to do? "Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God."