

Question and Answer with Pastor Dave 8/2/20

(These are questions I received in advance and for which I prepared or outlined responses.)

Last week's sermon dealt with the 12 spies checking out the land of Canaan. After that, the Hebrews did occupy that land. But God commanded them to do so by committing genocide against multiple groups of people. How can that possibly be OK?

This is why we don't have these question and answer sessions very often! This is one of the most difficult questions for me to answer about the Bible. Fortunately, the question came in early in the week, so I was able to do some research on it. Unfortunately, none of the answers I read were entirely satisfying!

Background: God had promised the land to the descendants of Abraham 500 or so years before. Then God commanded his people to take the /and under Joshua's leadership. In some cases they simply drove out those who already lived there, but in other cases, they were commanded to completely annihilate every living thing- men, women, children, and even animals. I know! Some Bible scholars believe that most non-combatants would have left the walled cities that were destroyed prior to the battles. And, this was done only to a small number of towns, but it was done. It often followed some kind of Canaanite aggression.

The Bible itself gives two reasons for this unprecedented action. First, this was judgment on the Canaanite people, who engaged in the worship of horrible gods, resulting in oppression of the poor, widespread temple prostitution, and even offering children as sacrifices to their gods. The Canaanites knew about the Hebrew God, and had been given ample time to repent, but refused to turn from their profound sin. Israel was a tool to bring God's judgment on them. Some people did repent, like Rahab in Jericho, and the entire city of Gibeon, and they were spared.

The second reason God gives for the destruction is to protect the Hebrew people from adopting the horrific practices and beliefs of the Canaanites. In fact, when some Canaanites were allowed to remain in the land, Israel was ensnared by their gods time and time again for centuries.

This ruthless destruction of people and cities was only authorized by God at this particular time and in a few specific places. It was part of God's plan to give this land to his people, and eventually bring about the blessing of the entire world through them. To do that required that they not be assimilated into the pagan religious practices of the people of Canaan.

Some people have sought to explain away the problem by saying that the Israelites misunderstood God's command, or that this was just typical Middle Eastern hyperbole, not what was actually done. But those explanations have their own problems.

This is a very difficult question, because God's command to destroy the Canaanites appears to run counter to other biblical teachings about mercy, compassion, and protecting innocent life. I can't reconcile it with what we know about God through Jesus. I can only explain the background and results.

What are GPC's plans for the Fall regarding worship and CE?

I don't know. Next! Regarding worship, we had about 30% of our normal in-person attendance during July, while many more were watching from home. In light of that, people have asked if we're going to re-start the early 8:15 service in the Fall. We have plenty of room without it. We've put out a survey to help us assess how many people plan to attend in-person worship in the Fall, and which service they plan to attend. Please fill it out. We'll analyze that data and make a decision in the next couple weeks.

Regarding Christian Education for children, youth, and adults, we are working on that just like our public schools are! If we can find a safe way to do in-person instruction, and the teachers to lead it, then that's what we'll do. If not, we'll do something else!

All of this is premised on keeping the rates of infection in our community fairly low like they are now. If we experience a surge in virus cases, then we'll shut down our in-person ministries and worship services again.

Why don't we consider ordination and marriage to be sacraments?

What is a sacrament? It is a means of grace. It's not a biblical category; The Bible doesn't talk about sacraments. It's a church designation! So wide variety of Christian opinions. Baptists and Pentecostals have none. The Roman Catholic Church has seven!. We Presbyterians have two- the Lord's Supper & Baptism. Sacraments are not about salvation, but assurance of God's love for us through tangible means. Ordination & marriage can also be a means of grace for many people. However, they are not available to everyone, which is perhaps why they aren't considered sacraments.

What is your favorite story about Jesus, and why?

I like many stories about Jesus! The feeding of the 5000 shows Jesus compassion on the crowds. And he met their physical and spiritual needs, using the gifts of others.

Name three things about ministry that they didn't teach you in seminary.

1. How to deal with a pandemic!
2. How to work with a Session and other church leaders.
3. How to do effective ministry in a culture that's not much interested in church anymore.