

Genesis 2:15-3:8  
Matthew 27:45  
Mark 15:33  
Luke 23:44

## THE PRIME DIRECTIVE

You know the term “proof-texting,” right? It refers to the practice we all have, at least on occasion, of pulling out this or that particular verse or sentence from the Bible as an authoritative support for our own particular opinion. For example, in some specific moment or situation I might quote First Corinthians 14, verse 34: “*Women should keep silence in the churches.*” If I think women are inferior or if I am having trouble with some particular woman’s point of view, this might seem a very handy verse to know. If I think quoting this verse will make the women shut up, I must know even less about human nature than I do about the Bible. Paul, by the way, knew a lot about human nature. Nevertheless, if I use this verse for such a purpose, I do not know much about the Bible either, and certainly next to nothing about the Apostle Paul. Paul, like Jesus before him, was a strong advocate for women. This was difficult, since Paul was carrying Christianity into lands and cultures heavily influenced by Greek culture (Athenian more than Spartan), and by Socrates and Aristotle, who were indeed insistent that women were in no way equal to men. Paul, to the extreme opposite, says: “*For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*” (Galatians 3:27-28)

It does not take much research to learn that in the early Christian church, unlike what was happening all around them, the women were not separated off into a different balcony or court from the men. They were full participants in worship – praying, prophesying, preaching, speaking in tongues. Phoebe was a deacon; Junias was numbered among the apostles; the church met in Lydia’s house. Paul had utmost appreciation and respect for the women who labored with him for the Lord, and frequently said so. So where is this strange remark coming from? A little context helps.

Paul’s subject is not women, but keeping order in the worship at the church. He is urging people to be better prepared, and to be careful about interrupting each other. If there is no one at the worship service to interpret what is being said, do not speak in tongues – keep silent.

By the way, this request for silence does not mean that “tongue speakers” may never again preach or pray or prophesy in the church. So with the women. If Paul were saying “Shut up,” he would have used the Greek word *phimoo* (fim-OH-o), which means to muzzle, to tie shut. But Paul uses a very different word, *sigao*, which means the kind of silence asked for in the midst of clamor or disorder – a voluntary silence. (Acts 15:12; Luke 18:39; Acts 12:17) Paul is saying: “Please do not chitchat when the service is going on.” I often wish he were here when we enter the sanctuary and our Prelude begins! Paul is not suggesting that women should be forbidden to pray or preach or sing or prophesy or read Scripture. *Sigao*, not *phimoo*! Quiet down, not shut up forever.

Proof-texting is an old game that Christians have played for generations, but seldom to any real benefit. Discerning the will of God in a given situation takes more sincerity and willing obedience than just pulling one domino out of the pile. And sometimes we must put the singular concepts together into theological precepts – whole concepts and themes that we have come to trust. Otherwise we are endlessly confused, and vacillate between seemingly contradictory details. On some major issues, taking into consideration as much of the full story as we can grasp, we do have to make up our minds what we will believe and count on – what we will bet our lives on. Is God cruel, or is God loving? Or is God cruel on some days, and loving on others?

For me at least, there are philosophical frameworks that are enormously important to my faith. They keep me sane sometimes, and help me to keep perspective and make choices when it is not all sweetness and light. Yet these frameworks are not specifically locked down to a familiar doctrine or easily established by specific passages of Scripture. Rather, they come as hints from long musing over *all* of Scripture, and all human experience. They come from myths and teachings that surround the people of faith. They come from sages and saints both famous and unsung, who help us to further comprehend our faith and our God.

I have been present many times over the years, as you would know, when people have faced the loss of loved ones. Often people have turned to me in emotional anguish, saying, “How could a loving God allow such a thing to happen?” I do not try to give an answer at such a time. In the midst of grief, nobody cares about theological niceties. They just want their loved one back. Sometimes, in the anger of grief, they say, “I guess

there are no answers to such hard questions.” If that means they cannot have their loved one back, that is right. If that means we cannot have any understanding about God’s ways, that is not right. I have known the answer to that question for years. Every Christian needs to know it. There are questions we cannot answer, but why a loving God allows evil, cruelty, and tragedy on earth is not one of them. In the actual moment of grief and loss, it is not a time to discuss such matters. Maybe now is a good time.

Let us also acknowledge that the question is bigger than our personal pain. A friend of mine recently took his children to Phnom Penh, where they visited the schoolhouse where Pol Pot conducted cruelties that stagger all human sensibilities. How can a loving God stand by while such things are happening? Aside from the methods, an estimated two million people are dead because of this man’s “leadership.” And in terms of sheer numbers, Hitler and Stalin make Pol Pot look like an amateur. None of the three were ever brought to any kind of accounting. Brutal and cruel beyond telling, they slaughtered without qualm or conscience. No tragedy of nature in anyone’s memory could stand beside one day of evil at the hands of Hitler or Stalin or Pol Pot. Yet no accounting worthy of the name ever occurred. There is no justice. “*Thou shalt not kill*”? Says who? Where is God?

What do Christians say about such things? Well, they say some very profound things, but they also frequently say some really silly things. To keep it safe and distant: Back in 1990, there was an earthquake in San Francisco. The television cameras recorded our reactions. At first we were told that several hundred people were crushed underneath a fallen highway – one freeway overpass falling onto the one below it. Every now and then, the reporters would interview some person who had been rescued. “Oh, thank God!” they would cry. “God delivered me!” What about the hundreds who did not escape, whom God did not deliver? What about the many loved ones watching? Were they to conclude that God did not love *their* friends and relatives, leaving them to die on purpose while he was busily saving others who really mattered?

Every time – here or in any church across the land – when somebody stands up and thanks the congregation for prayers that helped them or a loved one, *do you not know* that there are other people sitting here saying to themselves, “I wonder why God didn’t help me or my loved ones when we needed it and prayed for it”?

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The precept I want to put before you today is not beyond your comprehension. It is difficult to “hear” because we do not like it very much. But if I can get it clear enough so you will start discussing it with each other and playing with it in your mind after the sermon, then I will have done my part. Obviously, some among you already know and trust the precept, and have for years. That’s okay – you will probably enjoy this more than anyone else.

In my own mind, I call it the “PRIME DIRECTIVE,” because without it, every point and purpose of this world’s existence would be ruined. IT IS THE DECISION OF GOD NEVER TO DO ANYTHING THAT WOULD DESTROY OUR FREE WILL. I believe it is both the hardest and the most necessary of the conditions of this Creation, from God’s side. I think of it as a rule that God made for God to keep. God made ten for us, but also one for himself. And God swore to himself: “I will influence, but I will not directly – or physically – interfere in a specific situation.” I imagine God pondering for a long time before his mighty hand swept across space and called the worlds into being. And God was searching within: “Will I be able to keep this rule – this PRIME DIRECTIVE? If not, there is no point to bringing any of it into being.”

First, the goal as we perceive it: It is the function of this world to be a training ground for souls. The capacity to love depends upon choice. If I am good because there is no other option, or if I care because I cannot help it, I am an automaton – a robot. The very value of what it means to be a person, a spiritual being, is lost. I must choose the good because I come to value it, and choose to love because love fills me and becomes my way – or it means nothing, and is in fact a charade and counterfeit. The world is full of people pretending to love because they are supposed to or because they have learned that it makes people cooperate better, and not because they really do love. It turns out awful! We hate fake love. Therefore, free will is the first and primary requirement of this world. It is not just a nice addition – it is the primary condition. Apart from this free will, there is no meaning or purpose to our Creation. God built us a self-contained spaceship, and on it we get to experience free will and all of the negative and positive ramifications thereof. God made it temporal so that we could do no permanent or eternal damage. And the PRIME DIRECTIVE is that God must keep hands off. Any form of direct hands-on management would destroy free will instantly, and then the whole affair would be for nothing. We shall return to that point in a minute.

For the moment, let us be as clear as possible so we are at least on the same subject: God will not break natural law to save you, or to save anyone *from* you. God designed the laws and conditions of Creation very carefully. If God did not think they were right and necessary, he would have used different ones in the first place. And God will not break them under any circumstance, for any reason. We need also to add the obvious: God understands natural law better than we do, and we are constantly discovering that there are endless possibilities to what he has set up.

What about the biblical story? Start with the great myth that orients us to what is going on. (Genesis 2:15-3:8) Where does the serpent come from? Why does God allow the serpent into the Garden? Why is there a tree that gives us choice (knowledge of good and evil), and why does all mankind and womankind eat the fruit? (*Adam* means all mankind; *Eve* means all women.) The fruit of the knowledge of good and evil is also the power of choice. We have free will. These things are in the story because that is what the story is about.

All the way through the rest of the story, does God ever personally prevent disaster, prevent Israel from sinning, prevent Israel from slavery or defeat? God often inspires Israel to enormous deeds of heroism, and influences them to heights of inspiration and aspiration. But as I understand the story, God never directly intervenes in specific circumstances. Sometimes the humans think so and claim that God broke all the rules for them. I am sure this is comforting, but I have come to disbelieve it. God communicates, but does not coerce. God, I often suspect, sets larger patterns in motion, and surely plays within the framework of the universe law already created and established. But I do not believe we do well to expect select physical favors open only to us or the favored few. There are incredible spiritual powers and potentials available and spiritual principles that can be used – if we learn them. Jesus teaches us a lot, if we will listen and learn. But that is different. God will not let you walk through walls one day and then get angry and throw a thunderbolt at you the next. I know many people would dramatically disagree. Some of *you*, if I have heard your conversations correctly, would disagree. Nevertheless, I am suggesting that there is a PRIME DIRECTIVE, and that God keeps it no matter how much it breaks his heart. And if we do not realize this and come to terms with it, our faith will confuse and betray us at least as often as it directs and strengthens us.

I was talking with a woman one day and she was excited about having bought a new refrigerator. “But it’s being delivered this afternoon,” she said, “and I’m just praying really hard that it will fit through the door and into my kitchen.” She lived in a second-story apartment and knew that the delivery men would have a real task getting the refrigerator up the steps, around the small landing, and through the door. After that, it was a small kitchen with only one possible place for a refrigerator – a space built into the wall for this purpose. So she was praying hard. But what was she really expecting? That if she had been good enough, God might shrink the refrigerator a little when nobody was looking? Or that God might do a fast remodeling job on her kitchen, and cover the traces? Just for her? I don’t think she needed prayer – I think she needed a tape measure. And if it turned out that it did fit, I wouldn’t think it was due to God or her prayer. I would think she was undeservedly lucky, and I’d be happy for her. But that does not mean I agree with her theology. Well, you say, she was only teasing. But you don’t know her like I do. It was clear on this and many other occasions that she had never stopped to figure out anything at all about what prayer would do – and what prayer would not do. Hey, that’s fine for her – she is a lovely lady with a big heart and many friends. But it is not good enough for you! You are disciples and witnesses for Jesus Christ. If you think God will shrink your refrigerator for you, you will be endlessly disappointed. God could, by the way. But God is not going to do that for you – no matter how much he loves you. And God will not do it for anybody else, either – no matter how saintly they are. It would break the PRIME DIRECTIVE.

Again and again God gives us, if we will listen, possibilities we did not know existed. We call it miracle, until we learn how it works; then we get used to it and consider it natural phenomenon. Influence is not forbidden. The Holy Spirit, I believe, is constantly whispering to us. God inspires and influences. But God will not forcibly stop a Mack truck, or a Hitler.

Some of you bill say to me, “What about the day the sun stood still for Joshua?” (At Gibeon – Joshua 10.) I know what it’s like to have a day feel extended and allow me to accomplish more than I thought was possible. Don’t you? This story is grateful and poetic, and no doubt expresses how people felt about the event. But I do not believe that God stopped the rotation of the earth so one Israelite general could kill a few more enemies in one of a long string of running battles. I have no doubt that God has the power to do that. But I also trust God to have too much

intelligence to do that. And one victory hymn from the ancient past is not enough to convince me that God would break the PRIME DIRECTIVE. Things are possible here that we have not fathomed and do not yet comprehend. But that is not the same as God repealing universe law at whim – going against the principles of his own Creation to benefit some people and not others. I believe God never does that. There would be chaos if God did. We would learn nothing, because we could never know which principles were applicable on any given day. Two plus two equals four one day, and five the next? No matter how much we beg God to break the rules for us at times, life here depends on God keeping the rules he has made. And there are times when we hate that – and times when God hates that too.

Why doesn't Jesus tell His true identity, even to the twelve disciples? Why does He wait until they come to it themselves? Is it not because if they come to it themselves, nobody will be able to take it from them? He guards their free will. He chooses them, but they must respond by choosing Him back. Why doesn't Jesus stop Judas, or prevent the disciples from betrayal and abandonment? You may think it is because Jesus wants to die, but that is a terrible misunderstanding. **He guards their free will.** Jesus convinces – He does not coerce! He would rather die first ... and does. That is a huge part of the story. Jesus would rather die than force – than coerce – than take away choice and free will. He knows the PRIME DIRECTIVE, even down on everyday levels. (*"You shall not tempt the Lord your God."* (Luke 4:12)) And learning from Him, we should know it too.

Why doesn't Jesus heal every sick person in Israel, or even in the whole world? There are many miracle stories, but only a tiny handful in comparison to all the suffering people. Despite all the healing and miracle traditions from that day to this, two things always stand out.

One: No matter when in history, no matter who is doing it, some people are healed and some people are not. Isn't that strange? It's as if some can receive and others cannot, or will not. Or as if some things are healable and others are not. Probably both. Why don't we want to admit that?

And two: Across the world, in playgrounds everywhere, children get into fights. Never does God reach down and prevent one child from hitting another. Sometimes God whispers and a child hears, and a fight stops. But God does not reach down. Is that not interesting – and terrible?

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Just one level above that: At various times across the world, soldiers kill. Or some try to torture information out of others, or maybe even torture solely as an object lesson of fear to the enemy. God does not reach down and stop the incredible cruelty of what we sometimes do to each other. Either a loving God does not exist, or there is a PRIME DIRECTIVE.

Each of the synoptic Gospel writers records that at the time of the crucifixion, the sky turned strangely dark. It was as if God were struggling against the PRIME DIRECTIVE – squirming in rage and pain to keep from breaking the most essential precept. How could God stand by and allow such treatment of his Son? To interfere would destroy everything. To guard free will ... to keep the possibility of repentance and love open ... to keep the Laboratory of Life operational – all were necessary to the entire affair, including the coming of the Christ. So the writhing God withheld the angry hand. Have you ever been a father? **Never was the world in such peril!** And the voice of the Son rose instinctively to meet the Father's pain: *"They do not understand, they do not know what they are doing, they cannot see from here ... Father, forgive them."* If God kept the PRIME DIRECTIVE in a time like that, do you think God would forget it in any other scenario that we could ever imagine? Trust it. No matter what anybody says or claims or claims to know – trust it. God will keep the PRIME DIRECTIVE.

Some of you say to me: Why does God make it so hard? Why do we have to struggle so – learn to discipline the mind, spend hours in prayer – to discern the guidance? Why does God whisper? Why doesn't he just tell us straight so we can know for sure?

Stop and think! If God spoke to you straight and you knew it was God, would you have free choice? Would there be any free will left? Could you, a mere mortal, defy The Almighty if you knew for sure that it *was* The Almighty? Could you ever learn – or come to appreciate and honor truth by your own response to it – if God spoke as clearly as you think you want him to? God dares not speak above a whisper. God guards your free will. You can hear only if you choose to, and want it badly enough to go searching with all of your heart. Only then can God speak without coercion. And even then, you are required to be an active participant in the dialogue – God inspiring you to see, but only what you have grown into and can grasp genuinely. This world, of necessity, is a place of separation. Of necessity, we “see through a glass darkly.” Watch out for

people who make absolutely clear and simple that which God has hidden, and reveals only to the pure in heart.

Learn the rules, friends: We are at risk here. God will not prevent you from hurting others, and God will not prevent others from hurting you. You have to learn to do that yourself. None of us would ever learn if we did not have to live where we see the consequences of our behavior, and feel the repercussions of what it means to be who and what we are.

Some people choose to think this means there is no God. And God allows them to make that choice and hold that belief, for as long as it makes sense to them. They get annoyed at me and accuse me of sophistry. But I have to note that if God arranged things the way they insist God should – that is, if God is to satisfy their criteria for being a loving God – there could be no choice, no free will, no love or meaning, here or anywhere. Since I hear the whisper and see the necessity, it does not seem strange to me anymore that God has arranged things this way. There are many questions for which I have no answers. But this is not one of them.

Two scenarios to close:

First scenario: If you are driving down the road in your car and up ahead, unknown to you, a child is wandering out into the street, God will not reach out a hand to save that child's life. If God behaved in that fashion, it would destroy free will and ruin every reason for our being here. But God will whisper in your ear: "You are in too much of a hurry. You are not awake and aware. You need to return to peace and watchfulness." If you have said your prayers that morning and truly wish to be in tune with God, you will hear the whisper and the child's life may be saved. Influence, not intervention.

There are endless possibilities built into this place, and I do not want this sermon to make you think for one moment that you have fewer possibilities here than you thought. No – you have far more than you realize even yet. There is power all around us – available, just waiting to be taken in and used – more than any of us have realized.

Second scenario (a sermon rarely preached, from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians): Paul lived with what he called "a thorn in the flesh." (12:7) Three times he asked God to remove it – to heal him. God did not. To our knowledge, Paul never asked for its removal again. He learned to live with it. To our knowledge, he also never complained again. Here was

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a man who healed so many others, whose miracles stunned people across the land. Yet he was not surprised that faith did not put him in charge of the universe. It was not his own power, nor did he control it – it belonged to Another, and Paul only used it when and where he could get permission. This time, for some reason, the healing was not granted. Paul did not know all the whys of that. He accepted it and moved on. Three requests and then acceptance. Are you able to hear that?

Can you imagine Paul saying, “If you don’t heal me, I won’t believe in You or Your love anymore, and I won’t go on any more journeys for You.” I cannot imagine that either – not of Paul. I would like to not be able to imagine it of any of us.

The PRIME DIRECTIVE is that God will not directly interfere with events here. God will influence and inspire – if we want it enough, open ourselves, and are truly willing to receive. But God will not physically step in or coerce or break natural law. The PRIME DIRECTIVE is that God will guard our free will, no matter what the cost – to him or to us.