

“What Would You Do?”

I’m not a big fan of reality television. In fact, for the most part, I can’t stand it. *It’s all so scripted and over-the-top dramatic and fake.* I’m sorry, but what you see on some of those shows is **not even close** to the real world or real housewives or real life—period. It’s all contrived, scripted garbage. *Well...maybe not all of it.* There are a couple of “reality” shows I do enjoy. I like to watch “Cops.” I love to watch my deer hunting shows. (I need all the help I can get!) I love to watch sports, although there are times that I think that some of those events are rigged and scripted too. My wife and I, though we disagree with each other on most television programming, love to watch “*What Would You Do?*”

For those of you who aren’t familiar with this show, the producers set up hidden cameras and microphones and then hire actors to act out some sort of *troubling scenario in the midst of real life.* The idea is to see how various everyday people react. Some of the more memorable scenarios include a couple of doctors at a bar over lunch who’ve obviously had a few and are now talking about going back to work. *What would you do?* Another one that comes to mind is locking a pet in the car on a warm day with the windows rolled up tight. *What would you do?* What if the owner comes back and tells you that it’s none of your business? *Then what would you do?* Pregnant women smoking or sidling up to the bar for a good stiff drink, racism in the workplace, a customer from hell in the grocery store line berating the bag boy who has Down’s Syndrome...these are just some of the scenarios ordinary, everyday people are tested in, all in front of the *unblinking, unbiased* eye of the camera, for all the world to see. *What would you do? Would you step up and say something if you saw something troubling taking place, or would you stay out of it?*

In looking over the lessons for today, particularly the account of St. Stephen being put to death for “telling it like it is,” you can’t help but see the connection. *The question begs to be asked of all of us when it comes to matters of faith: What would you do?* Before we go any further, it’s important to point out that there is a difference between *knowing* what the right thing is and *actually doing* the right thing. When it comes to matters of faith, I’m quite positive that everyone here knows the proper actions and reactions of a “textbook Christian.” We know what God says. *However, that doesn’t always mean that we follow through.*

Pick out any aspect of life and you can be certain that God speaks to it and addresses it. For argument’s sake, let’s just look at the first three commandments—the ones that deal with our relationship to God. “*You shall have no other gods. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.*”

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.” Sounds easy enough, right? We all learned those as kids in catechism, and I’ll be willing to bet that our catechism kids right now could take a test on these Commandments and ace it. Yet, if we’re honest, we must confess that there’s a **profound disconnect** in our lives. I guess the question is not so much “*what would you do,*” but “*what do you already do?*”

It’s a humbling question, isn’t it? What do we do when sinful error rears its ugly head in our lives? What do we do when we’re placed in that ugly situation of having to **choose** between standing with God or **saving face** with the rest of the world, perhaps even friends and family? **How’s that for a reality check?** In our 21st century American culture this choice isn’t even a life and death choice like it was for Stephen and for many of our other faithful forefathers. Nowadays, the choice between God and man comes down to really nothing more than a matter of **convenience and ease**. If we stand firm in our faith, life may get a little uncomfortable. Someone may not like us. **We can’t let that happen, can we?**

But we fallen children of Adam aren’t stupid. In fact, we’re downright cunning. We try to find a way around the problem all the time. **We try to manipulate things so as to please everyone.** One of the classic tricks of a manipulator is to **re-label** and **re-classify** the sin as something other than sin. “*That’s not a sin. That’s just kids doing what comes naturally. That’s just two consenting adults finding out if they’re compatible for the long-haul of marriage. That’s just two people living out their love in an alternative, but equally valid sort of way.*” Sound familiar? There’s also the tactic of **shifting the blame**. That’s one that’s been around for a long time, so long, in fact, that Adam and Eve tried it when God confronted them with the question, “*What have you done?*” “*It’s her fault. It’s the snake’s fault. God, it’s Your fault. You gave me the woman!*”

Believe me when I say this, pastors hear this one **all the time**. I’m sure you do too. “*It’s your fault. You handled things wrong. Here’s how I would do it.*” Yes, but there’s the problem. **You didn’t do it.** God presented you the same exact problem and you did **nothing**. “*Pastor, you hurt so-and-so’s feelings. You need to apologize. You need to reach some sort of compromise and work things out so we’ll have peace.*” Peace? What kind of peace are you talking about? The peace of simply getting along? The peace that comes when you turn a blind eye and act like sin is no big deal, or at least no one else’s business but that person? **The peace that an ostrich has when it buries its head in the ground? That’s not peace!** That’s a lie that could only come from the devil himself. It certainly doesn’t come from God, who tells us Himself that husbands and wives and sons and fathers and mothers and daughters will all **hate** each other **on account of faithfulness to Christ and His Word**. “*Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on My account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.*” **Blessed are you—by God—when you do your job.**

And that's just it. Standing firm in the faith is the job of *every* Christian, not just the job of a pastor. Yes—your pastor is called to and expected to stand firm on the side of God, *even if it means death*. That's the vow every pastor takes in his ordination. Some of us take our jobs very seriously, which means that we do make enemies. I've been removed from more than a few Christmas card lists. Truth be told: *This is also the same vow you take in your confirmation* (cf. page 273 LSB). “Do you intend to live according to the Word of God, and in faith, word, and deed to remain true to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even unto death?” “I do, by the grace of God.” *Would the cameras tell a different story?*

You see, that's what true faith is. *It's not just simply believing something or saying that you believe something*. Anyone can do that, and many people change their beliefs more often than they do their underwear. They have no backbone; **no conviction**. True, saving faith *is* conviction. It's firmly standing your ground; standing firm on the solid rock of Christ in the midst of a world full of sinking, shifting sand. **Notice**: This doesn't mean that you have to be the loudest or the most outspoken. Many a time the loudest one leading the charge is also the most foolish one. Scripture is filled with references to clanging symbols and resounding gongs. Christ Himself stood boldly in the faith before Pontius Pilate and the entire Roman world *without ever saying a word*. *Faith is confident conviction, not necessarily volume*. Confident, convicted faith knows the truth. **It doesn't compromise**. It doesn't settle for anything less than the truth. “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” True, saving faith stands with Christ *alone*. Like I've always said, if we could get a glimpse of the reality of our sin and the devil and hell, our lives would look and sound a whole lot different. If we could get a glimpse of where we often stand in life, we'd hit the ground in repentance and beg for God's mercy and forgiveness.

In fact, *that's exactly what true, saving faith does*. It repents. It knows the reality. It knows the ugly truth. More often than not, when confronted with one of those “what would you do” moments, we fail. We sin. We side with the path of least resistance. “No one comes to the Father except through Me,” *and Christ's way is the way of the cross*. This is exactly where true, repentant, saving faith cleaves—Christ and His all-redeeming cross. “Father, forgive me, not only because I know not what I do, but especially because sometimes I know exactly what to say, think, and do and I still don't do it.”

And that's the Good News here. Your heavenly Father does forgive you—*completely, no strings attached*—not because of anything you do, but *only* because of what Christ Jesus has already done for you in your place. *It is finished*. You are *completely* forgiven because of Christ Jesus. This is precisely why no faithful pastor will ever tell you what you need to do in order *to be saved*. I'll guarantee that you haven't heard a single word to that effect in this sermon!

Truth is: There's **nothing** you can do to bring about your own salvation. We fail that reality test every single time. As Christians, we do what we do, be it thought, word, or deed, **because** we are saved. We pass the divine reality test **because** we are covered over in the white robe of Christ's righteousness and justification. When God looks at us, He sees only Christ. The imperfect sinner is still there, only now that imperfect body of sin is covered over in the perfection of Christ. **The condemnation and guilt is absolved.** If that doesn't produce a joyful response within you—a heartfelt desire to thank God with all that you do and all that you are—then maybe you ought to examine what it is you believe and cleave to. **The problem isn't with the message. It's with the receiver.**

And that's how we'll end for today. I won't end by asking you to now go out and do this, that, or the other thing. **It's not about that.** It's not about what you would do or what you already do or what you need to do. **It's not even about what Jesus would do. It's all about what Jesus has done—for you, for me, and for the entire world.** This is where strong, faithful conviction comes from—the sure and certain reality that is the crucified and resurrected Christ. My prayer for you is that through the amazing gift of faith that God has worked in you through His Word and Sacraments, **you stand firm in your Christian conviction**—your faith that cleaves to the reality that is Christ alone—the Way, the Truth, and the Life. **Stand firm and let God work.** As we see with St. Stephen, God works in mysterious ways and accomplishes great things in us and through us, all because of Christ our Lord—our Rock and our Salvation.

And may this true peace, which surpasses all human understanding and is known only in true, saving faith, guard and keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, now and into all eternity.

AMEN