

BIBLE MAP #4
Psalm 119:1-8, 105, 111-112: Ephesians 6:10-20:
Matthew 7:24-27

This is week four in our BIBLE MAP message series where our goal is to make the Bible more Meaningful, Accessible and Practical.

Let's begin today with some research from the highly respected Christian organization, The Barna Research Group. In a 2006 study it found that:

80% of survey respondents said that they considered the Bible the most influential book in human history.

90% of respondents said they owned a Bible, but 50% said they never read it.

While 90% of those over 45 described the Bible as "sacred" only 67% of those between 18-25 did.

Now before those of us over 45 starts patting ourselves on the back here's one final fact.

Whereas 20% of those 18-25 expressed an above average interest in gaining additional Bible knowledge, only 9% of those over 65 did!

All of these statistics really prove just one thing. It's a hard truth.

"Christians like the Bible. We're just not that interested in it anymore."

And that, my friends, is the biggest challenge facing the Church in North America today. We have pushed God on to the sidelines of our life and with it have lost the passionate spirituality that fuels our Christian faith. And here's the thing. It doesn't matter how well ministers preach, or how many bible studies we offer; until every one of us gets back into the practice of getting to know our Bibles the Church in North America, and indeed our congregation, will falter.

Do you remember the Pharisees and the Sadducees in the New Testament? They liked God's Word. It was their sacred book. They liked to quote it a lot. They particularly liked the parts that reinforced their own opinions. They dismissed, as Jesus often pointed out to them, the parts they didn't like.

They weren't very good at living out what the Bible calls "*the whole counsel of God.*" Sounds much like the way we treat the Bible today, doesn't it? Now listen to what Jesus said to them in Matthew 22:29:

“Your mistake is that you don’t know the Scriptures, and you don’t know the power of God.”

Ignorance of Scripture is a spiritual roadblock that makes it difficult for us to know and to understand the power of God and to release it into our lives. Our ignorance of Scripture means that we are living our lives dangerously. Do you remember the parable Jesus told us about that? Matthew 7:24-27:

24 “Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock. 25 Though the rain comes in torrents and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won’t collapse because it is built on bedrock. 26 But anyone who hears my teaching and doesn’t obey it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand. 27 When the rains and floods come and the winds beat against that house, it will collapse with a mighty crash.”

Now if you have a house you know the importance of it being built on a firm foundation and with the right materials. God tells us that the same principles are at work when we build and grow our relationship with Him. Remember the Bible is the principal way that God has chosen to speak to His people. And for us as Presbyterians, the Bible is our primary standard, the rule of faith and life. This is what we confess as Presbyterians. It is recorded in our denominational document “Living Faith: A Statement of Christian Belief”, which is one of the subordinate standards of our denomination.

The Holy Spirit gives us inner testimony

To the unique authority of the Bible . . .

Relying on the Holy Spirit,

We seek the application of God’s Word for our time.

Now you have to understand something. The Holy Spirit’s role is not to make new things up. Jesus said of the Spirit, John 16:13:

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own but will tell you what he has heard. He will tell you about the future.

In other words, the role of the Spirit is to teach us the truth that is already contained for us in the Bible, God’s written Word to us, and in the teachings of Jesus, who is the Word become flesh. The Holy Spirit certainly gives us new insights into Scripture but His role is not to change Scripture.

So the importance of the Bible in the life of Christians, and in the life of the Church, simply cannot be understated. In Psalm 119 (1-8, 105, 111-112) we read:

Joyful are people of integrity,

who follow the instructions of the Lord.

2 Joyful are those who obey his laws

and search for him with all their hearts.

3 They do not compromise with evil,

and they walk only in his paths.

4 You have charged us

to keep your commandments carefully.

5 Oh, that my actions would consistently

reflect your decrees!

6 Then I will not be ashamed

when I compare my life with your commands.

7 As I learn your righteous regulations,

I will thank you by living as I should!

8 I will obey your decrees.

Please don't give up on me! . . .

105 Your word is a lamp to guide my feet

and a light for my path. . .

Your laws are my treasure;

they are my heart's delight.

I am determined to keep your decrees

to the very end.

Jesus, of course, was very clear about why God's Word is so important. Do you remember when, at the beginning of his public ministry, Satan tempted him? The stakes were high. If Jesus gave in to temptation and sinned he

would no longer be sinless. If he sinned, he could not die for our sin, and we would still be lost to God forever. First Peter 1:18-20 affirms that:

18 For you know that God paid a ransom to save you from the empty life you inherited from your ancestors. And it was not paid with mere gold or silver, which lose their value. 19 It was the precious blood of Christ, the sinless, spotless Lamb of God. 20 God chose him as your ransom long before the world began, but now in these last days, he has been revealed for your sake.

And Second Corinthians 5:21:

For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ.

So when Jesus was tempted by Satan the stakes were high, for Him and for us. So how does Satan tempt Jesus? He tempts him to use his power to serve his own needs, not ours. He tempts him by asking him to prove Who he was, as if that needed proving. He tempts him to take a shortcut to glory and essentially to bypass the cross and his death for our sins. How does Jesus deal with these temptations? He quotes Scripture. Three temptations. Three times Jesus responds with these words:

“The scripture says . . . ”

The same principle applies to us. Knowing God’s Word is one of the major offensive weapons we have as we face opposition in our Christian lives – from Satan, from our humanity, from our desires, from other people, or from our culture and world. Listen to Ephesians Chapter 6 as it talks about the armor of God that is available to us.

A final word: Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. 11 Put on all of God’s armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil. 12 For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places.

13 Therefore, put on every piece of God’s armor so you will be able to resist the enemy in the time of evil. Then after the battle, you will still be standing firm. 14 Stand your ground, putting on the belt of truth and the body armor of God’s righteousness. 15 For shoes, put on the peace that comes from the Good News so that you will be fully prepared. 16 In addition to all of these, hold up the shield of

faith to stop the fiery arrows of the devil. 17 Put on salvation as your helmet, and take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

The belt of truth. Where do we find that truth? In the Bible.

The body armor of God's righteousness. Where do we learn about that and see it demonstrated? In the Bible.

The shoes of peace that comes from the Good News? Where do we find the good news of God, the gospel? In the Bible.

The shield of faith? Where do we learn the meaning of faith and what it looks like and why it is so important? In the Bible.

The helmet of salvation. Where do we learn about God's plan of salvation? In the Bible.

The sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God? That's another name for the Bible.

It is the Bible that gives roots to our faith.

Listen to some of the references Jesus made to the Scriptures.

The Scriptures say . . . (Matthew 4:4)

"Now go and learn the meaning of this Scripture . . . (Matthew 9:13)

"Haven't you read in the Scriptures . . . (Matthew 12:3)

But you would not have condemned my innocent disciples if you knew the meaning of this Scripture . . . (Matthew 12:7)

"The Scriptures declare..." (Matthew 21:13)

"Didn't you ever read this in the Scriptures? (Matthew 21:42)

"Your mistake is that you don't know the Scriptures . . . (Matthew 22:29)

For the Son of Man must die, as the Scriptures declared long ago. (Matthew 26:24)

But this is all happening to fulfill the words of the prophets as recorded in the Scriptures. (Matthew 25:56)

All those references and there are many others, are from Matthew's gospel alone. So if Jesus put such an important stress on the Scriptures, and we are his disciples, should we not take them just as seriously?

Now, honestly, for many of us, this is a huge shift in the way we have been living our Christian lives. We have become so focussed on our activism, in doing church, in going to programs and meetings, that we have often cut ourselves adrift from those things that need to be foundational to the life of a disciple – studying the Bible and prayer.

I'm not saying any of the other things are wrong. They're not. They're an expression of our faith. But what I am suggesting is that it's time for us to put first things first. So here's the challenge. Will you commit 15 minutes a day to Bible reading and prayer and do that for three months. Why three months? Because according to research, it takes a person about three months to learn a new habit. In your bulletin today you'll find a bible reading guide to help you get started. God bless you as you grow in your experience with God's Word.

Pastoral Prayer

Eternal God,

You are the beginning and the end, the source and giver of life.

You are the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ.

You are the Spirit who leads us into truth.

Help us to build on lives on the firm foundation you have laid for us in the Scripture so that we may always stand firm for you.

As we live our lives in this new week,

may our worship and our work be one:

may the gifts of your Spirit be evident in our lives:

may our love for others be real and genuine

and may forgiveness and reconciliation permeate our relationships.

We pray the promise of your Word into the lives of others:

truth to set people free from the things

that bind and enslave them:

comfort for those who mourn:

mercy for those who are afflicted:

peace for those who live in fear:

healing for the sick:

relief for the persecuted:

and wisdom for all of us.

Especially, we pray today for the President elect of the United States and for the new members of the House and Senate. May they find ways to heal America after their divisive election campaign.

Be with the people of Haiti as they rebuild after Hurricane Matthew.

Guide the leaders of Europe as they continue to seek solution to the current refugee crisis.

Grant an end to the war in Iraq and in the many other hostile parts of the world.

And all these things we pray in the Name of Jesus, the living Word of God.
Amen.