

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
August 27, 2023

Words of Life

John 5:31-47

Several years ago, we had a message on our church sign that said: FOR DISCIPLES OF JESUS, SCHOOL IS ALWAYS OPEN. So you've had no summer break, no down time from studying the way of Jesus. There's no time off when it comes to receiving instruction from the Lord. That's why you're back again this morning with your Bible, our primary textbook, in hand. Or if you didn't bring one of your own, we provide one in the pew rack. As for loose leaf paper, composition books, glue sticks, markers, and other supplies, those are optional. But the Scriptures are definitely not.

Jesus knew that many of the leaders and teachers in his own religious tradition were diligent students of the Scriptures. They spent a lot of their time exploring what the sacred texts said about the will of God and how to practice it in the ordinary, detailed circumstances of daily life. For them, this was much more than just a matter of building their knowledge base about God. It was a matter of having what only God could give, namely, eternal life, the life of the world to come. Now in one sense, they were looking in the right place, for the Scriptures, rightly interpreted, pointed to Jesus. But they weren't able to see this. So in our text for today, Jesus criticizes them, saying, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (vv. 39-40).

That word "testify" comes up often in today's Scripture passage. It's related to the word "witness." Though both terms have a religious dimension, they're also used in a judicial or legal sense. In other words, Jesus is on trial, not primarily for specific deeds of wrongdoing but for who he claims to be. He claims to be sent by the Father. He and the Father are one. As God's Son, Jesus is the embodiment of Israel's God. He is the saving presence of God in the world. He is the point of access to eternal life. In view of such claims, people need to make a decision about Jesus. They need to reach a verdict about his identity. They face a choice of either accepting him or rejecting him.

So in our text, Jesus is busy gathering up all the evidence that supports his claim to be God's Son. Since his testimony to himself would not count as valid evidence, additional witnesses are required. Jesus therefore serves as his own defense attorney. He lays out the evidence, starting with the preaching and teaching of John the Baptist. Then he reminds his hearers about the works that he has already done in his life and ministry. Then he says that the Father himself has testified, though he doesn't go into detail on this claim. Then Jesus wraps up his argument by citing the evidence of the Scriptures. He contends that his own people's sacred writings point to him and are fulfilled in him.

And yet, with all this evidence, many still refused to believe. So as our passage goes on, Jesus turns from being a defense attorney to being the prosecutor. He charges his opponents with not being faithful interpreters of their own Bible. Near the end of our passage, Jesus says to those who rejected him, "But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses,

you would believe me, for he wrote about me" (vv. 45-46). What a remarkable statement. According to John, Jesus claims that Moses, who lived hundreds of years before himself, was actually writing about him. That one statement reflects our fundamental Christian conviction that God's revelation of himself in Jesus is continuous with, and the crowning point of, God's revelation of himself in the writings we call the Old Testament. And when combined with the New Testament, what we have is a whole Bible whose purpose is to point to Jesus.

That's why it's so important that you and I be students of the Bible and faithful interpreters of Scripture. Remember that we're "people of the book", individually and together. Our life as a congregation, and our lives as individual believers, are grounded in the conviction that God speaks and that we're called to respond. And the Scriptures stand at the center of this divine/human interaction. The biblical message is a living word. It confronts us, challenges us, and convicts us. It forms us and reforms us. It points us to the one who is himself God's word, God's message to us, Jesus Christ.

We live in a period when biblical literacy is probably at an all time low. Especially during the past couple of decades, people's knowledge of basic biblical facts and essential biblical narratives has declined more rapidly. This isn't just the case for America, but more importantly for the church. We may try to take some comfort in the fact that American society is increasingly post-Christian and secular. But the reality is that among confessing Christians, those who claim to hold the Bible in high regard, many folks don't have a basic knowledge of the Scriptures.

This low level of biblical literacy within the church is especially troubling in view of how the Bible is woven into so much of what we do and how we do it. Scripture is read during worship, preached on during the sermon, and taught during small group Bible studies on the Lord's Day and on other days of the week. Remember that there's a reason we still call it *Sunday School*. It's a place to learn the Scriptures in a structured, systematic way. Then there are also the opportunities you already have, or need to create, to give attention to the Bible in personal study and devotions, or in other group settings. When we read and listen to the Scriptures, we need to do so not only individually but in community with others.

Of course we also have to be careful about the ways we search the Scriptures when we do study them. Our methods make a difference. I like the way that author Jen Wilkin describes some of our mistaken approaches to Bible study. One person has summarized them this way:

- *The Xanax Approach.* Feel anxious? Read Philippians 4:6. Feel tired? Read Matthew 11:28. The Xanax Approach treats the Bible as if it exists to make us feel better. Bible study is about finding comfort for my issues. The problem with this approach is that I ask how the Bible can serve me, rather than how I can serve the God it proclaims.
- *The Pinball Approach.* Lacking a reference or any guidance on what to read, I read whatever Scripture verse I happen to turn to next, ricocheting from one passage to the next. But the Pinball Approach gives no thought to the culture, history, authorship, or original intent of the passage.
- *The Magic 8 Ball Approach.* Remember the Magic 8 Ball? You just shake it and wait until it provides a clear answer to your most difficult questions. But the Bible isn't magical and its primary function is to transform us rather than to answer our most pressing questions.
- *The Personal Shopper Approach.* We don't actually study the Bible; rather, we shop around for Bible teachers or preachers who suit our tastes. This isn't all bad, but it can prevent us

from taking ownership of Scripture. Much like the Pinball Approach, we ricochet from teacher to teacher and topic to topic without getting the tools to study God's Word for ourselves.

- *The Jack Sprat Approach.* In the English nursery rhyme, the character Jack Sprat "could eat no fat." We take this approach when we're picky eaters who refuse to digest certain parts of the Bible. But all Scripture is God-breathed and profitable. We need a balanced diet to grow into maturity.¹

I'm not saying that accumulating a certain level of biblical knowledge, or utilizing a particular method of study, is the key to experiencing eternal life. That only happens by believing in the one sent from God. Jesus says, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life." It's easy for us to stand there beside Jesus and point our finger at those who first rejected him and his message. But sometimes we ourselves are just as guilty of refusing to come to him. For instance, when we neglect the Scriptures and don't study them. Or when we engage the Bible just for how it can serve us, rather than how we can serve God. Or when we read the Scriptures solely as individuals and not in community with each other. Or when the biblical message comes to us, but we close our ears to it.

Or when we hear the message but don't do what it says. In the midst of our zeal for searching the Scriptures, it's easy to lose sight of the fact that the Bible's aim is to create people who not only know the will of God but who obey the will of God. Pastor and author Eugene Peterson describes how his experience with long-distance running shed light on how he was handling the Scriptures:

At age 35 I bought running shoes and began enjoying the smooth rhythms of long-distance running. Soon I was competing in 10K races every month or so, and then a marathon once a year. By then I was subscribing to and reading three running magazines! Then I pulled a muscle and couldn't run for a couple of months. Those magazines were still all over the house, but I never opened one. The moment I resumed running, though, I started reading again.

That's when I realized that my reading was an extension of something I was a part of. I was reading for companionship and affirmation of the experience of running. I learned a few things along the way, but mostly it was to deepen my world of running. If I wasn't running, there was nothing to deepen.

The parallel with reading Scripture is striking. If I'm not living in active response to the living God, reading about his creation/salvation/holiness won't hold my interest for long. The most important question isn't "What does this mean," but "What can I obey?" Simple obedience will open up our lives to a text more quickly than any number of Bible studies, dictionaries, and concordances.²

So one of the most important tools that you and I bring to our study of the Scriptures is our obedience to the word of God. In other words, faithful interpretation includes the ways that we're embodying the word in our lives, individually and together. That's certainly in keeping with how the Father has spoken to us, in embodied form, through the Son. The word of God isn't simply a written text. The word of God is, more than anything else, the person of Jesus Christ, who is the expression of God. This means that we read and study the Bible, the written Word, in order to meet and receive the living Word, Jesus Christ. And in receiving Christ, you receive life, eternal life.

The *New York Times Sunday Book Review* regularly interviews a writer about what books he or she is reading. In June 2015 they asked the producer and screenwriter Judd Apatow

questions like: What books are currently on your night stand? Who is your favorite novelist of all time? What books might we be surprised to find on your shelves? They also inquired about books that he thought were disappointing, overrated, or just not good. They asked, "What book did you feel you were supposed to like, and didn't? Do you remember the last book you put down without finishing?" Apatow replied: "The Bible. It's just not working for me. I wish it was. Wouldn't it be great if it did work for me and I had the peace one gets when knowing the universe is just and kind and guided by eternal intelligence? Maybe I'm reading it wrong."

We read the Bible right when it leads us to meet and know Jesus. When it creates the love of God in our hearts. When it enables us to do the will of the Father, through love of God and neighbor. We read the Bible right when it brings us to encounter and engage with Jesus.

Remember that the Bible is a witness. It points to the Son, who points to the Father. In fact, later in John's Gospel, Jesus says that he is not only the way to the Father and the source of life, but also the truth. This doesn't mean that Jesus is a divine curriculum, or a textbook from heaven, or God's version of a standardized test, designed to measure our spiritual achievement. No, Jesus is God himself, descending to where we are, revealing himself to us, so that we can be forgiven and made new and live in right relationship with him. This means that the truth, about God, about us, and about God's relationship with us, isn't mainly a body of knowledge, but the body of a person, Jesus Christ. And these are the Scriptures that testify about him.

¹ "Five Unhelpful Ways to Study/Read the Bible." Preaching Today. <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2014/august/5080414.html> (August 25, 2016).

² Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 70-71; paraphrased in the September 18 entry of the Men of Integrity website (September/October 2009).