

The Word of God

2 Kings 22 & 23, selected verses, Matthew 7:24-29

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We say it every Sunday. When someone reads a passage of scripture, he or she finishes with these words, "This is the Word of the Lord." And we mumble in reply, "Thanks be to God." But wait: This is the word of the Lord...God's word. This is the word to us from almighty God, from the creator of the universe, the giver of all life. This word is something we need to pay attention to.

The two passages that we read this morning both underscore the importance of reading and hearing God's Word.

The Old Testament passage we read tells about the time when Josiah was king of Judah, and one day he sent his secretary up to the Temple to inventory the Temple treasury. Maybe they were doing their annual financial review. As they were counting the money, apparently someone looked over in the corner and saw a dusty old forgotten book. Out of curiosity, this person went over and began reading the book. At once he realized that he had stumbled onto something very important. Some Bible scholars think that what he found was an early version of the book of Deuteronomy, the book that gives God's instruction to the people about how to live, how to follow God's law, how to be God's covenant people. So the secretary took the book that he had found to King Josiah, and read it aloud to the king. When Josiah heard the words of the book, he tore his clothes in anguish because he realized how far the people had strayed from following God's teaching. King Josiah knew that something needed to be done, so he resolved to make some changes. He summoned all the people, and together they reconfirmed their covenant with God, to live according to God's word.

The New Testament passage we read also reminds us of the importance of hearing and living by God's Word. It's the story where Jesus says that whoever hears his words and obeys them is like a wise man who built his house upon the rock. When the storms came and the winds blew, the house was strong and it withstood the storms. By contrast, those who hear the words of Jesus and do not obey them are like a fool who built a house on sand. When the storms came and the winds blew, the house could not stand and it fell with a great crash. Jesus isn't giving architectural advice here; he's talking about us, about people. And the difference between building our lives on a solid foundation that will endure life's storms and building our lives on a shaky foundation comes down to our hearing and obeying the words of Jesus.

Throughout this season of Lent, as we continue our journey to the cross, preparing ourselves for our observance of Holy Week, Jesus' crucifixion, and our celebration of his resurrection on Easter, we are looking at various ways that we can deepen and enrich our relationship with God. Today are talking about doing that through reading the Bible.

I know lots of people who say that the times they feel closest to God are when they are taking a walk along the beach or when they see a beautiful sunset. When they see the grandeur of the world that God has made, they feel God's presence, the hand of the creator. I get that; I feel that too.

But there is only so much that we can learn about God by looking at a sunset or at the reds and yellows and golds of autumn leaves. As beautiful as they are, and as much as they

may point us to God, they do not tell us all that we need to know of God. God knew that on our own we are limited in what we can know about God. So God took the initiative; God spoke. The Bible says that God's word became flesh and dwelt among us. God spoke a Son. The affirmation of faith we are going to read in a few minutes says that Jesus, who was in the form of God, emptied himself and became a human being. Jesus is God's word to us. God sent Jesus to reveal to us the deeper truth about God.

We can't look at a sunset and learn from it that God loved us so much that God sent Jesus to live and die for us. We cannot look at the morning mist coming off a lake and learn from it that our sins are forgiven. There's only so much we can learn about God by looking at creation. To know more fully who God is we need to look at and listen to Jesus. And if we are going to look at and listen to Jesus, we need to read the Bible.

Every officer who has ever been ordained in the Presbyterian Church has answered "Yes" to this question: "Do you accept the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's Word to you?"

Do you believe that? Can you say Yes to that? Do you believe that the scriptures are God's Word to you and the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ? That is to say that we learn something about Jesus by reading the scriptures that we cannot learn anyplace else. Do you believe that the Bible is God's word to you? If you do, then what you are saying is that if you want to know Jesus better, you need to read the Bible...because the Bible is "the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus." It's in the Bible that we hear God's word spoken through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. That is why faithful Christians need to develop some practices that will help them get into the word of God.

Some people have compared the Word of God to food. Deuteronomy says, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (8:3). Often the Word of God is described as honey, sweet to the taste. That's what the psalmist says in Psalm 119. For the psalmist, reading God's word was not a burdensome duty, but a delicious delight, sweet as honey.

There are many ways of reading the Bible that people have found to be a blessing. If you have found something that works for you, well and good...keep at it. But if you're struggling to find something that works for you, let me offer some suggestions. If you're new to Bible reading, I would suggest that you start not at the very beginning, but with one of the gospels. And remember: the goal is not to see how fast you can get through it, but to spend some time with the word and let it engage you.

I used to think that the discipline of Bible reading meant forcing myself to read three or four chapters each day to plow through the Bible from beginning to end. Now if that practice works for you, fine; keep going. But one of the things I have discovered about my own Bible reading is that I need to take it in smaller pieces and to slow down when I read. I'll admit that sometimes the daily Bible reading is just another thing on that day's To Do list, and so I'll rush through it and check it off, done for the day. When I do that, I rarely get the experience of something sweet as honey. To get that I need to slow down.

One thing that people have done that is to focus on a very small passage of scripture, perhaps only a verse or two. This method works well when you are reading the psalms. Say you are reading Psalm 23. Just simply let that first verse wash over you: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." Savor it; taste it; rest in it. Say it over and over again. The LORD

is my shepherd. The Lord is MY shepherd. The Lord is my SHEPHERD. I shall NOT want. Just let the word of God fill you. Savor it, taste it, rest in it.

A similar method for devotional reading of the Bible is called *Lectio Divina*. It's another way to slow us down and let us take some time with the scripture reading. *Lectio Divina* doesn't work if your goal is to read large chunks of the Bible at a time. It's for smaller pieces—not chapter by chapter, but paragraph by paragraph.

So once you've chosen your paragraph to read that day, here's how *Lectio Divina* works. I'm going to give you the five steps of the *Lectio Divina*, so if you want to jot down some notes, feel free. Let's say that your passage for the day is the scripture that I read from the gospel of Matthew—about the wise man who built his house on the rock and the foolish man who built his house upon the sand.

Step one, of course, is to read the passage; maybe read it several times; maybe read it aloud, so you can actually hear the words. If you have access to different versions of the Bible, read the passage from each one. Step one: read.

Step two is simply to ask: What is this passage saying? Sometimes it is obvious what a passage is saying, but other times it is not so clear exactly what a particular passage is saying—especially if you're reading a book like Revelation. So to learn what a passage is saying, you may find it helpful to read a commentary, perhaps one like William Barclay's Daily Study Bible commentary or N. T. Wright's *The Bible for Everyone* series of commentaries. There are lots of helpful commentaries that can help you discover what a passage is saying. For example, here's what N. T. Wright says about this passage from Matthew. He says that Jesus was saying something shocking and new for them. For those first hearers the new thing that Jesus is saying is that the strong foundation for life is found in *his* words, Jesus' words. There were then, and there still are today, lots of words out there giving advice about life. But Jesus says that the only place to find the teaching that will endure life's storms is in the words of Jesus.

Step three in the *Lectio Divina* is to ask, "What is this passage saying to me?" How does this passage address what is going on in my life? So in our example from Matthew, we might spend some time thinking about how are we doing in our listening for God's word. Or perhaps we might find ourselves confessing that there are times when we do not allow God's word to direct our actions. Maybe what this passage is saying to me is that I need to try to filter out all those other voices so that I can hear more clearly God's word spoken in Jesus.

Step four is "What do you want to say to God about this passage?" This passage is God's word to you, so what to you say in response? Maybe your response to God as you read this scripture in Matthew is that you are thankful for Jesus' teaching. Or perhaps you find yourself admitting that you find it hard to live by Jesus' teaching. Tell it to God.

Then step five is to ask, "What difference will this passage make in my life?" This is where you seek to put God's word into action in your life.

So those are the steps: Read...What is this passage saying?...What is this passage saying to ME?...What do I want to say to God about this passage?...What difference is this passage going to make in my life?

Let me wind up this sermon on Bible reading by saying that I personally have found the most meaning in Bible study when I am doing it with someone else. You may know that I meet every Monday with a group of pastors, and each week we spend an hour to an hour and a half studying a passage of scripture. And many has been the time that I went to that Monday morning meeting having read the passage and having come to the conclusion that

there is nothing preach-able there. I have no clue what the passage is saying to me. But then we get together and we dig in, and before long we discover ideas, thoughts, truths that we didn't see when reading it alone. Somehow I think that the Holy Spirit is at work when we gather with brothers and sisters and together seek to hear God's word to us.

So having said that, let me put in a plug for getting involved in a Disciple Bible Study class or a Sunday School Class or our Wednesday evening Bible study or simply organizing your own home meeting for Bible study. I think that will enrich your Bible reading immensely.

Our prayer is that with the psalmist, we will say, "Your word, O Lord, is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path." Amen. ✠