

## Psalm 119:10-16

<sup>10</sup> With my whole heart I seek you;  
do not let me stray from your commandments.

<sup>11</sup> I treasure your word in my heart,  
so that I may not sin against you.

<sup>12</sup> Blessed are you, O Lord;  
teach me your statutes.

<sup>13</sup> With my lips I declare  
all the ordinances of your mouth.

<sup>14</sup> I delight in the way of your decrees  
as much as in all riches.

<sup>15</sup> **I will meditate on your precepts,  
and fix my eyes on your ways.**

<sup>16</sup> **I will delight in your statutes;  
I will not forget your word.**

## Romans 10:14-17

<sup>14</sup> But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? <sup>15</sup> And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!' <sup>16</sup> But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed our message?' <sup>17</sup> **So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.**

## Mark 2:23-28

<sup>23</sup> One Sabbath he was going through the cornfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. <sup>24</sup> The Pharisees said to him, 'Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?' <sup>25</sup> And he said to them, 'Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? <sup>26</sup> He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.' <sup>27</sup> Then he said to them, '**The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath;** <sup>28</sup> so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.'

## How Do We Handle the Bible?

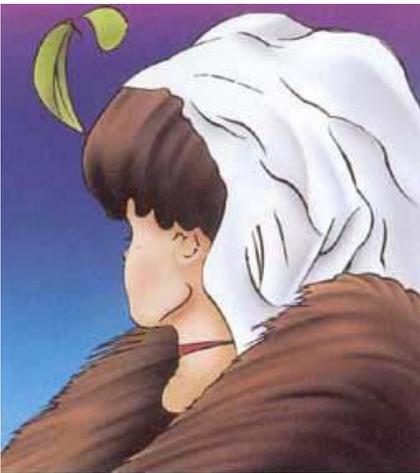


The Gospel lesson that we just read from Mark really illustrates the struggle we have with the Bible. Here is a book believed to contain truth, a book that purports to be the revelation of God, a book that we revere, that we swear upon and make oaths upon, but one that we can't seem to agree upon. Here you have the Pharisees, who are authorities on scripture, criticizing Jesus, who in turn uses scripture to defend his actions and the actions of the disciples. Same book; different understandings. And not only have Jews and Christians disagreed on the meaning of scripture and the ultimate authority of scripture; Christians can't agree with themselves on the meaning and authority of scripture – the Protestant Reformation opened up a big can of worms when it made the Bible the supreme authority on all Christian doctrine and

practice, and that can of worms got bigger with Johannes Guttenberg's invention of the printing press which meant that the Bible could now be mass-produced and translated into multiple languages. The disagreements in interpretation only multiplied to the point where we now have about 300 major ecclesiastical traditions and many more denominations.

And while there is nothing wrong with friendly disagreements on interpretation, not all those disagreements have been friendly. Professor John Riches of the University of Glasgow in Scotland writes:

“(The Bible) has inspired some of the great monuments of human thought, literature, and art; it has equally fuelled some of the worst excesses of human savagery, self-interest, and narrow-mindedness. It has inspired men and women to acts of great service and courage, to fight for liberation and human development; and it has provided the ideological fuel for societies which have enslaved their fellow human beings and reduced them to abject poverty. ... It has, perhaps above all, provided a source of religious and moral norms which have enabled communities to hold together, to care for, and to protect one another; yet precisely this strong sense of belonging has in turn fuelled ethnic, racial, and international tension and conflict.” (*John Riches (2000). The Bible: A Very Short Introduction. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 134*).



The Bible is like this famous illustration by W.E. Hill; is it a young lady or an old hag? The answer is that it all depends on the person who is looking at it. And our response to what we read in scripture can be either beautiful or ugly, depending upon how we interpret it.

Which is why some people avoid it altogether. It's like fire; it can warm us and bring us light, but it can also burn us or even blind us. But avoiding it is not an option for a Christian. Paul says in our epistle lesson:

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? <sup>15</sup>And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?

Christians are sent, plain and simple, so we have to know a little something about the word of God if we expect to introduce others to Jesus Christ and transform their lives. We have to experience the good news as good news if we want others to know it as good news.

So today I want to prescribe to you a way of handling this very hot item called the Bible, so that it brings you warmth draw them closer to Jesus Christ.

So how should you read the Bible? **The first thing you should do is read it prayerfully.** Know that the Bible is God's best effort at communicating with us, but it's confusing, frustrating, and sometimes makes absolutely no sense to us. Don't

worship the Bible, but respect it. As a professor of mine once said, “The Bible is a mess, but somehow God manages to communicate through it.” Pray before you read, and ask God to show you truth.

**Second, you should read the Bible systematically.** Not as a fortune cookie; don’t just offer a prayer, open it to a page, read a sentence and expect it to change your life. Besides, you are quite likely to misinterpret the Bible if you just pick out verses here and there and string them together as a logical argument. Different authors had different perspectives, and you’ll only frustrate yourself or others if you pretend that everything in the Bible connects in some tidy way. Read it a book at a time, and concentrate on that one book until you finish it. Remember that the Protestant Bible is not one book but sixty-six books, books that were written by various authors at various times in various contexts with various intentions and in different languages. You don’t have to start with Genesis, but whatever book you start with, based on your interests and needs, do a little background study of the book. You have the benefit of nearly two thousand years of Biblical scholarship, of literary criticism, form criticism, history, archeology and anthropology, all to give you a clearer idea of what the author or authors are writing about. Before I read a book of the Bible, I want to feel like I’m *there*, like I’m the audience the writer was originally writing to. I want to feel the heat of the desert, the threat of an invading army, the frustration of being marginalized and oppressed, the thrill of being delivered from my enemies. I want to know what the words meant *then* before I try to interpret them in the *now*. Take, for example, Paul’s words to the Church of Ephesus; “Wives, submit yourselves to your husband as you do to the Lord, for the husband is head of the wife as Christ is head of the church.” A lot of modern women take offense at this passage, saying that it’s misogynistic, that it’s sexist. Well, that was what the world was like two thousand years ago; Paul wasn’t saying anything new or radical. But when he wrote, “Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the Church and gave his life up for her.” In a culture where wives were treated as personal property, to love your wife as Christ loved the church was a radical notion.

Which brings me to the next point. **Read the Bible with your brain.** I’m not kidding on this. Some people read the Bible with someone else’s brain, and that’s not always a good thing, because there are lots of people who would like to tell you how to think – there were plenty of slave-holding Christians who liked to tell their slaves that slavery was an institution sanctioned by God because it’s there in the Bible. That argument doesn’t hold water, and thank God there were enough people who recognized that slavery is NOT compatible with a Christian lifestyle. It took hundreds of years for the Church to admit this, but eventually it did. God gave you a good brain of your very own. You need to make your own decisions on what the Bible is saying and how applicable some passages are to our modern world. You won’t agree with every other Christian, but it will be your own conclusion based on your own study and understanding.

John Wesley correctly observed that we see the Bible through three lenses: the lens of reason, the lens of experience, and the lens of tradition. Let’s talk about each of those...

First, reason. God has given you a brain, and from what I know of everyone here, you all have pretty good brains. Thank God for your brain, and use that brain when you study scripture. You might laugh, but some people are afraid to do that. They would rather hear someone tell them what to believe, even threaten them that if they don’t believe what they believe that their soul is in danger. Such people are only interested in getting you to fall into line and support their theology right or wrong. The last I checked, God wanted us to use our wonderful brains, *especially* when it comes to scripture. The point is not to believe what someone else told you; how can you claim your own faith if you’re just trying to believe what others tell you to believe? You have to do the work yourself, ask the questions yourself, seek God with your own heart and mind. You have the benefit of centuries of biblical scholarship behind you. Learn something about whatever book you’re reading before reading it, then read the whole book – it doesn’t take that long to do. Yes, some books are easier than others, but you can gain something from every book in the Bible.

Second, experience. The Bible contains both timeless truth and time-bound truth, truth that made sense to people of a particular time and place. When you read scripture, weigh it against your experience and see how it stacks up. A lot of what you read will click, but other things won’t correlate to your experience. Don’t deny your own experiences or think that you’re wrong because some people insist that you see it their way; today’s Gospel reading finds Jesus and his disciples plucking grain apparently on the Sabbath, and the Pharisees interpret this to be a violation of sacred law. Jesus sees things differently; even though he respects scripture and recognizes the same scripture as the Pharisees do, he takes a different approach, and cites a different passage of scripture that seems to vindicate his disciples, then says,

“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” Sometimes your experience may lead you to act in ways that seem to contradict *something* in scripture, and believe me there will usually be some Pharisee hiding in the closet who will call you on it and tell you that what you’re doing is sinful, but trust your experience and prayerfully seek God’s guidance in understanding scripture and how it relates to your experience. Accept that there will be tension or conflict from time to time. Don’t despair or think yourself evil for this disparity, but seek God’s counsel, and speak to a Pastor and your friends and see what they think.

Third, tradition. You know, the Bible makes no mention of Lent or Advent, yet these are seasons of the Christian calendar that have developed over time, and they have deep meaning to many Christians. Just because they’re not in the Bible does not mean that they are worthless or should be discarded. Lent is a time of deep, focused reflection upon our sin, our mortality, and such reflection helps us understand just how glorious a thing the Resurrection is. Unfortunately the meaning of Advent has been obscured by Santa Claus in the last century, but it’s a time of preparing ourselves for Christ’s coming, not the first but the second. Traditions serve to tie us together as a community and keep us on the road of discipleship. Traditions also inform of reading of scripture, which is okay.

So those are the three lenses through which we need to view scripture. The last thing I would tell you relates to something I shared several weeks ago. To a certain extent, God is unknowable. Don’t worry; God doesn’t leave us completely in the fog - we know him through Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, through creation, through the written word, but even with all of that, we can’t know all the answers, *so get used to it*. Enjoy the journey without being anxious about reaching some destination. If you’re walking with God, that’s enough. Be comfortable saying, “I don’t know.” My experience has shown me that it’s the folks who seem to have all the answers are the ones who know the least, or as the Korean proverb states it, “The empty can makes the loudest noise.”

The Bible is a fascinating book that can keep you intrigued for a lifetime. Don’t be afraid of it, but don’t expect it to answer all your questions either. Don’t be shocked by the things you disagree with, but seek guidance from the Holy Spirit. Discuss those things with your pastor and with others. Let it be a source of inspiration and comfort for you. And may you hear God’s voice speak to you through it.