

## **“How Should We Approach the Bible?”**

**Jeremiah 31:31-34    Mark 12:28-34**

Today is the last in my series on the Bible. I trust that by now it is clear that all Christians, whether they are literalists or liberals, interpret the Bible. Indeed the Bible insists that we interpret it. To read is to interpret, to bring to the text not only our own experiences and outlooks but to meet in the text the experiences and outlooks of the authors of the Bible. It is in the experience of the coming together of the community of faith, past and present, that God often chooses to be made known. This occurs through the power of the Holy Spirit, which blows where and when it wills. Given all this, the question arises, how should we approach the Bible to ensure that we do all we can to be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit through reading Scripture.

The first thing we need to say is that there is nothing we can do to guarantee that God will speak through the text. As I just said the Holy Spirit moves when and where it wills. There will be times when we do very little more than simply read the text and God will speak to us. There will be times when we can spend hours of study and prayer on Scripture and nothing happens of consequence. No less a luminary than John Wesley, founder of the Methodist church, said that Scripture is useless as a guide to faith unless, as he put it, it is read through the **“spectacles of the Holy Spirit.”**

Still, there are things we can do to make ourselves more open to the movement of the Holy Spirit through the text. One of the first hurdles we need to cross is that of attitude towards the Bible. C.H. Dodd quite correctly points out, I believe, that **“In general we may take it that if the Bible is to do the work it makes certain demands upon the readers at the outset.**

**In the same way Jesus Himself could not save men without their own good will. . . . Still less can the Bible do anything for a reader who does not satisfy such minimum requirements, which may be summed up as sincerity, openness of mind, and that fundamental reverence that is a willingness to be commanded.”**

It helps a great deal to keep in mind what the ultimate goal of the whole exercise is. We do not read the Bible to learn all of God’s do’s and don’ts, although we might pick up a few of these along the way. We do not read the Bible to learn about God or Jesus in a mere “disembodied way”, a way that has little to do with who we are and how we live. We approach the Bible with the hope expressed in the Scripture from Jeremiah that God will put God’s law within us, that it will not be an outward experience but an indwelling word. The hope as Jeremiah so beautifully put it is that God **“write it on our hearts”** and I would add to that in the spirit of our text from Mark, that God will not only write it on our hearts, but on our minds, souls and wills.

It is significant in the Hebrew Scriptures that the Hebrew word for “know” involves more than just mentally or intellectually filing something away in our brains. The same word that the ancient Hebrews used for knowing something in your head is the same word that they used for two people who loved each other, expressing that love sexually. Imagine that! This is what Genesis meant by two people becoming “one flesh”, talk about deeply knowing another person! The ancient Hebrews believed that to deeply know something you have to be in deep loving relationship with it or them.

Among my favorite authors is Rabbi Harold Kushner, whose best known book is, *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People*. I remember him

expressing his views on the Scriptures in a video series. In his comments he said that he viewed the Bible as being a **“love letter from God.”** Now let me ask you all, and this is not a rhetorical question, “Have you ever received a love letter?” “Do you remember what it was like?” “What did you do with that letter?” “Did you save it and pull it out from time to time and read and reread it over and over again?” Kushner said, **“Do you know that I can tell you what the middle word of the Hebrew Scriptures is? That I can tell you what the middle letter is?”** That’s not a bad way of approaching the Scripture. Think of it as being a love letter from God.

Now let’s turn our attention to the Gospel passage. Jesus is asked **“Which commandment is the first of all?”** Now remember the commandments are essentially Scripture, since that is where they were they were found. Essentially Jesus is being asked, “What is the most important lesson we can learn from Scripture?” As a result, Jesus does not just make something up, nor say something new, no, instead he quotes Scripture.

The first Scripture he points to would have been known by every Jew past or present. It is the famous *Shema O Israel*, found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5 **“Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”** Now it is interesting to note that in Mark’s Gospel Jesus adds “with all your mind” to heart, soul and strength.

We are back to approaching God with an attitude of love. Now while this passage is not directly about Scripture, I still think it is fair to say that Kushner’s idea of reading the Scriptures as a love letter from God holds. Our relationship with God is not to be one of compulsion from without, but of love from within, freely offered.

Notice that in Deuteronomy 6 this love of God has a foundation. Israel experienced God as a loving God in their history, in their experience. God was seen to have been the one who heard their cries when they were slaves in Egypt and sent a savior, Moses, to lead them out of slavery to the promised land. This savior came performing signs and wonders by the power of God.

Now let's briefly look at each aspect of love we are to show towards God. First, Jesus says we are to "love the Lord our God, with all our **heart**." In modern times we speak of the heart as the symbol of love. I don't think I need to say much more on this, since we have already talked a great deal about the attitude of love and how love leads to knowing. Suffice it to say that when we read the Bible we are to read it with love.

Next Jesus says that we are to "**love God with all our soul**." The soul in ancient times was the "life-force" of a person. It is that God given image of God spoken of in Genesis. There is a well known saying that says unless a person's eye is sunlight it cannot see the sun. Marcus Barth in his anthropological arguments, says, "**If we apply this to the question of biblical authority, it means that the Bible possesses authority only inasmuch as there is something in man that makes him susceptible to its influence. The mystery and seal of the Bible's authority, therefore, is a condition of man rather than of the book; its hearers and readers have to be alive and responsive. It acts compellingly because it meets with specifically human, personal, and existential needs.**" Certainly the Bible has spoken to human needs and human experience for thousands of years.

Next Jesus says that we are to "**love the Lord with all our mind**." We do not often think about the way we use our mind to "love", but when you love somebody you try and think of ways of expressing that love. Using

your mind as well as your heart, you try to take notice of the ways you are loved. Our brains are one of the greatest gifts that God has bestowed on the human race. Like all of our God given gifts it can be used for good or bad, but it is a great gift none the less. A sentence that has come to mean a great deal to me in the past year or so is, “God not only gave us the Bible, God gave us all a brain and God expects us to use both.”

Fourthly, Jesus says that we are to **“love the Lord our God with all our strength.”** We are not to be half-hearted in our approach to God. We are not to hold anything back. It was Soren Kierkegaard who said that **“Purity of heart is to will one thing.”**

As we enter the final section of this sermon, let’s look at the second commandment, which we are told **“is like unto the first.”** Love of God is intimately tied to love of neighbor. As First John points out “how can we say we love God, whom we have not seen, without loving our neighbor who we can see?”

Jesus wasn’t the only one to connect love of God with love of neighbor. Hillel the Elder was once challenged by a gentile to teach him the whole Torah while standing on one leg. Hillel replied, **“What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor: that is the whole of the Torah, while the rest is the commentary thereof; go and learn it.”** (Babylonian Talmud)

Once again love is the key, but his time it is to be expressed towards those around us. Jesus has drawn this commandment from Leviticus 19. Now when you read Leviticus you will not find many verses on love of neighbor or anything else! Jesus is highlighting one of the very few, if not the only one! This tells us something about how to interpret Scripture, does it not. Anything passage that does not highlight love of God or love of

neighbor, needs to be very seriously thought about and prayed over, and at time deemphasized or even ignored!

How should we approach Scripture? I can do it standing on one leg, We are to approach Scripture with an attitude of love of God and love of neighbor, using all our heart, soul, mind and strength. If we do this we will discover that the Bible, through the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, can awaken and redirect our whole being.

When the scribe heartily approved of Jesus' summary of the law, saying it was "more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices" the whole temple ritual and tradition, Jesus said, "**You are not far from the kingdom of God!**" Properly approached, the Bible can help us not only draw closer to God and neighbor but also to the kingdom of God! Amen.