

Follow the Directions

Detailed outline from the Sermon on September 2, 2007

The Bible as literature

At the very least, the Bible is great literature. (Time Magazine, April 2, 2007, *The Case for Teaching the Bible*)

- The Bible is an all-time bestseller – in fact, the best seller in every year.
- Shakespeare references the Bible 1300 times.
- Hemingway makes his “old man and the sea” bleed from the palms, carry his mast, while his hat cuts his head.
- Political slogans like, “Shining city on a hill,” “house divided against itself cannot stand,” “let justice roll down like waters” come straight from the scripture.
- Evangelical pundit Chuck Colson favors Bible-literacy courses. “Would I prefer a more explicitly biblical Christian teaching?” he asks. “Of course. But you can’t do that in public education. What you can do is introduce the Bible so that people are aware of its impact on people and in history and then let God speak through it as he will.”

It’s simply the most influential book of all time.

The Bible as inspiration and revelation

Christians would agree, of course, and add “Of course. It isn’t just any old ordinary book.”

- It’s *God-breathed*. That’s what inspired means and the book says of itself (or at least the notion of scripture) that “all scripture is spirit-breathed.” There is a sense in which God authored this book; not as if it were dropped directly from the sky, but as if the Holy Spirit of God implanted those concepts in the minds of very human Bible writers, who have passed it to us in a remarkably pure form, so untainted by the imperfections of the conduit.
- It is considered the Word of God, and it has a life-altering force to it. It’s dynamic and piercing and so true that it slices and dices and rocks and rolls and reproves and rebukes and...well, it changes us.
- Ephesians calls the Word of God the sword of the Spirit. By His words, God does a deep work, with a sharp scalpel, on our core thoughts and motivations.

- Until the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, Old Testament scripture was our primary source of God-breathed revelation, along with Creation and some special interventions. When Jesus did come, he proved scripture and reinforced the words, living them, amplifying them, clarifying all of it.
- Jesus is the living Word of God, and Peter says of the words of Jesus that they are the words of eternal life.

If we haven't found this to be true, the Christian system won't hold up for us. If these words don't have some *dynamos* (spiritual dynamite), or some spark or drumbeat of an old and deep wisdom that reminds us and lures us and awakens us to the source and Maker of all things, then we'll likely view this book as one of many interesting resources for life and faith. And that faith – not Christianity, mind you - will be a subjective mix of our own making.

“Who are you to tell me what is or isn't Christian?” some might ask. Great question. Who am I and who are you to be the founders of our own religions? Christians have always gone to the *Book* for definition and not to the subjective whim of any person or generation.

The Bible as wisdom and real help

One thing that proves the inspired nature of scripture is its phenomenal usefulness from generation to generation. It is ancient and forever modern; old-fashioned and newfangled; behind the times and way out ahead of us. And the principles and practices taught in this book simple work. They teach and transform, correct and clarify, rile us up and calm us down. The book covers our purpose for living, models for marriage, prescriptions for peace in the workplace, and every kind of principle to guide our politics, our relationships and our internal lives.

- Psalm 119 calls God's word “a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.”
- Deuteronomy 8:3 reminds us that we don't live by bread alone. We live by the words that proceed out of the mouth of God.

Reading, Studying, Knowing the Bible

Scripture says that we need to know scripture. We benefit beyond measure by reading, studying and knowing these words. We want them fixed in our minds so that they are accessible and instructive in the moment whether we can flip open a Bible or not. We want them hidden in our hearts; not hidden from people, but kept like a sacred treasury of wisdom. We want the words of Jesus to dwell in us richly, because the words of Jesus are as clear and clean and colossal as any words could be, putting the nature and will of God into understandable stories and statements.

And when we love God's words, we're told that we'll be like a tree firmly planted by streams of living water, rooting deep, spreading out; fully nourished and altogether fruitful.

Interpreting the Bible

Part of reading, studying and knowing the Bible is about trying to get it right. We don't want to distort it or misrepresent its teachings. We want to handle it accurately and replay it for friends and families in a way that affords them the same chance that we've had to see our lives affected by these words.

Some people say, "The Bible says it; I believe it; that settles it." That's not quite enough. We all interpret it. Toward that end, we want to do the interpretive work humbly, with a respectful curiosity that moves us closer to the real meaning of the text and the intent of the author(s). Theologians call this exercise "hermeneutics" or "exegesis," and we might call it "trying to get it right." Just what is God, through Moses, Peter, David, Paul, James or John, really trying to tell us?

Why the curiosity?

Applying the Bible and Obeying the Teachers

So we can honor God, follow Jesus and obey the teachers. Jesus said, "If you love me, you'll obey me." And love, mixed with respect, mixed with an honest admission of our profound need of help, leave us saying, "Lord, you show me what to do, and then please help me do it."

James, the brother of Jesus, urges us not merely to hear and walk away, but to do it.

Jesus finishes his Sermon on the Mount by saying, "If you hear this and don't act on it, you'll be like someone building a house on sand...But if you hear it and practice it, you'll be building your house on a rock."

He never says it will be easy, or that following and doing will make our lives carefree. He does suggest that we'll find deep peace, real purpose, healthier relationships and a path to everlasting life.

Knowing the Author and Chief Character

Mostly I read and study the Bible when I'm hungry to know God and to fellowship with Jesus, my savior and my relentless friend. He wants us, the Bible indicates, to know Him as we are known by Him, and to enjoy every benefit of a transforming friendship.

I simply hope you'll read the Bible... believe the Bible... believe in Jesus.