



Sermon

20 October 2019

The Word of God is Useful

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

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As William Tyndale faced a public martyr's death by strangulation and burning in 1536, he cried out, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes!" This intelligent, scholarly man from a comfortable background had risked his life by producing the first English translation of the Bible.

Tyndale wrote, *"I had perceived by experience, ... that it was impossible to stablish the lay people in any truth, except the scripture were plainly laid before their eyes in their mother tongue, that they might see the process, order, and meaning of the text."* And this passion was important enough for Tyndale to risk losing his life.

Some who do have the Bible in their own language complain that they don't understand it, but in the words of [Mark Twain](#), "It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand." Those are the challenging parts! Those are the parts which make us think, "I can't possibly live up to that!" But God replies, "Apart from me, you can do nothing. With me, you can." God gives us his Holy Spirit to be like the wine which helps the bread of life, the Word of God, to slide down and be digested, able to transform us from the inside.

In order to understand it, though, we have to read it. And not just a couple of verses now and then, but intentional, persevering reading, taking in the whole sweep of those 66 books. Then we will start to understand how it all fits together and to understand the passionate desire of God to communicate with those he created.

In the year which Philip Wrigley spent with us before he died, he read the whole Bible through, even though he was struggling with a terminal illness. Before he did the Alpha course, he would not have agreed that Jesus is The Way, the Truth and the Life.

I doubt whether he would have given the Bible a second thought, but we saw during the year following, how he grappled with it and found it come to life. It was useful. It gave him hope for the future. It helped him get to know and love Jesus. The presumptions he had acquired during a long life about God and his ways, gave way to the truth he found in God's word. So in 2nd Timothy today, we hear the climax of St Paul's last letter. Chapter 4:1 "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead... I give you this charge:" What do you think this charge was - his final charge, from the finest teacher of the early church? It was "Preach the Word."

This means the whole counsel of God, both Old and New Testaments. Paul says the Word is able to make you "wise, for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." So the Old Testament is able to prepare you to receive salvation through Jesus. It's not just a history book, a collection of dusty proverbs and confusing prophecies. It's useful, for this world and the next. As we read it, sometimes it may appear irrelevant and downright puzzling - perhaps when we read such things as, "Do not boil a kid in its

mother's milk."¹ That was not an instruction to avoid eating milk and meat in the same meal, but instruction to avoid a particular pagan worship ritual, practiced by other tribes around about.

The Gospels record Jesus making 47 direct quotes or references to the Old Testament. This is just a snapshot of how Jesus honoured the Word. We all remember how he used scripture to counter Satan's temptations. Satan responded, using Scripture in an attempt to manipulate Jesus, but Jesus refused to be manipulated. He exercised discrimination between the right and wrong use of Scripture. He was no mindless babler of the Torah. In Matthew 5, he forced his listeners to look at the *intention* of the text, by his assertion, "You have heard that it was said... But *I* tell you..." So Jesus' words are the final authority.

Jesus' attitude towards the law was complex. He declared that "not the least stroke of a pen would be removed from the law until all was accomplished"! What's more, he concluded this comment by saying, "Anyone who breaks one of the least of the commandments and teaches others to do the same, will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven." But on another occasion, he threw out whole sections of OT dietary law, declaring all foods clean². Being the Source of the Word, he knew what the purpose of each part was; what still applied and what didn't.

So the Old Testament is the very Bible Jesus read and quoted! He took his sense of who he was from it. He is the Living Word. He deliberately fulfilled some messianic prophecies ("as a sheep before her shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth"³) and many were fulfilled by his life in ways he could not control, such as the place of his birth and what would happen to his body when he was buried.

He put great weight on the Scriptures. When he was being challenged by the experts in the law and Pharisees, he was able to calmly correct them, because he was not only steeped in Scripture, but had the Holy Spirit guiding him. In [Matthew 22:29](#), Jesus answered the cheeky, challenging Sadducees, '*You're mistaken, because you don't know the Scriptures or God's power.*'"

We are mistaken in our attitude to Scripture if we judge it only by our own experience and wisdom. The weight of Scripture depends not upon whether we think it is likely, and not on whether it agrees with the political climate in which we happen to live. Those things change, but "The Word of our God stands forever."

We need to respect Scripture because of who inspired it. I remember reading a book on healing in which the author sensed God's rebuke, which was, "NEVER reduce my Word to the limits of your experience."

Before July 2018 I had never seen a man blind from birth, receive prayer and then demonstrate that he could see. Not having seen it before, had not stopped me praying for blindness to be healed. I read in the Bible that Jesus prayed for such healing, so I did it too. The temporary embarrassment of numerous failures was a cheap price to pay when having persisted, I finally witnessed a blind man seeing.

That transformed his life. He could now get a job, marry, support a family and be a productive member of society. If I had not heard the Word of God preached and read about Jesus healing the sick, I would never have known it was possible for him to see. The Word of God is useful.

I remember Mum saying to me that when Jesus fed the 5,000, it was probably because the people were shamed into producing what they had hidden away in the folds of their garments. She said that probably the miracle was their becoming generous. I want to say, "Oh Mum! Can't you just enjoy Jesus having authority over the things he has created? Why do you have to explain it away and make

¹ Deut 14:21

² Mark 7:14

³ Isaiah 53:7

it sound less than a true miracle? The people were hungry. Jesus had authority over what he created. He fed them. Are you among those who have a form of Godliness but deny its power?"

"You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God." That stinging rebuke leads on to a very careful exposition of the Word by Jesus. To those scholars who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, Jesus said,

"But about the resurrection of the dead – have you not read what God said to you, 'I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living!"

Jesus' interpretation here stands on the tense of one verb. "I AM the God of Abraham," not, "I was the God of Abraham." God is the God of the living, not the dead. That is a fairly close reading of Scripture, isn't it? You could almost say from this example that Jesus is a literalist!

Oh dear. Do we really have to throw away 200 years of Western thought in order to relate to the God of the Bible on his own terms? Well, it depends somewhat on how comfortable you need to be. It reminds me of when I heard the Bishop of London tell a story about interviewing a young would-be priest. I think the Bishop was sending him to work in a district which was not a very nice one. "I am not sure I am comfortable with that, sir," hedged the man.

"Comfortable! Comfortable?" roared the Bishop. "Who ever said anything about being comfortable?"

We are put in a position of discomfort when submitting to the Word of God, because the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men. We can't always fit it into our existing grid of knowledge.

Conversely, when we sit in judgement upon it, that implies that we are the judge of the text and can stay in our comfort zone. Of course, there are useful kinds of study called criticism. But we must always remember that the very text we are examining, is what reveals God's goodness in giving us Gentiles redemption, transformation and our place in His Kingdom. Those things are precious and useful possessions. Let's not just accept the parts which benefit us and reject the uncomfortable parts.

Paul warns Timothy that there will come a time, when people will not want to put up with sound doctrine, but will gather around them teachers who will say only what the people want to hear.

Let's not be like them. Let's be humble enough to allow the Word of God to challenge us, to rebuke us, to change us. Let's look at the character of those who have taught us, as Timothy did and consider the fruit of their teaching, not just swallow teaching because it conforms to the culture around us. Lord, open our eyes to see that Your foolishness is wiser than the wisdom of man.