

The Third Mark of Discipleship: Bible Reading

Do you love the Bible?

Not long ago I saw the most tattered copy of the Bible I've ever set eyes on. It belongs to Susan Thomas, who is a Presbyterian minister and hospital chaplain at Billings Clinic. Susan grew up in this congregation, and the Bible she showed us was given to her when she was in third grade, by this church. It was once a hardback book, but its cover is now worn to shreds. Some pages are loose from the binding, and others are dog-eared and torn. It is a well-loved Bible. Susan recalled the words which Ora Lemon, the church's beloved Christian education director, said to the third graders as they received their Bibles. "Wear it out," Ora told them. At least one child was listening!

To be a disciple of Jesus Christ means a commitment to always learning more about him. We are spending some time this fall emphasizing the differences between being a church focused on membership and its privileges versus being a church focused on discipleship and its expectations. Two weeks ago we talked about daily prayer as a mark of discipleship. Last week the message was weekly worship. This week the topic is reading the Bible, a third mark of a disciple of Jesus Christ. I'm not going to give it a calendar expectation like the daily prayer and weekly worship—"regular reading" of the Bible is what is needed. To be a disciple is to be a student, a follower, and the one text that is central and required in this course of study is the Bible.

Do you have a Bible in your home? I suspect so--91% of American households do. The typical household in fact has three Bibles. (Michael W. Foss, 2000, *Power Surge*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, p. 96) But I wonder how many of them are better dust collectors and bookends than sources of inspiration and edification. In her book *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris tells a story confessed to her by an old-timer in a North Dakota watering hole. When he was married, this old-timer said, his father-in-law gave the young couple a large family Bible. And for years, he asked them if they had read his Bible, and they always evaded answering. But when they actually did open the Bible, they discovered that there was a \$20 bill marking the first page of Genesis, a \$20 bill at the beginning of Exodus, a \$20 bill at the beginning of Leviticus, and so on for all of the 66 books of the Bible. If only the rewards of reading the Bible were so easily obtained!

It's true that the Bible can be intimidating. Howard Rice, the author of *Reformed Spirituality* (1991, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, pp. 97-99) names some of the barriers to Bible reading for those who live in our place and time. The Bible comes from a vastly different culture. It is thoroughly patriarchal, contains passages that justify violence in the name of God, at times it appears to defend slavery, it does not condemn polygamy and yet it does condemn divorce, and it forbids all lending of money with interest. Can a banker be a Bible-believing Christian? We all know about the controversies between creationism and evolution. Can a scientist be a Bible-believing Christian? Then there are the abuses of the Bible, such as using isolated texts to justify what one already believes, or choosing a few favorite scriptures and ignoring the rest, or using certain passages to oppress people. Beating people up with the Bible, in the name of the God of love. Go figure. The Bible in the hands of humans can be a dangerous book. And nearly every major conflict within the

Reformed branch of Christianity has been rooted in the principle of the proper interpretation of the Bible. This is the case in the current conflicts within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

But just because the Bible can be problematic shouldn't keep disciples of Jesus Christ from opening it, and reading it, wrestling with it, and studying it, and praying with it.

For the Bible is God's word to us, the prophetic and the apostolic testimony which points us to Jesus Christ. It is like Christ, fully human. It is also like Christ, fully divine in its origin. It is our common text, the gift of God, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's personal Word to each disciple. (Listen carefully later in the service when we install an elder—this is one of the ordination vows of elders, deacons, and ministers in our church.) The Bible is our guide, our source text, our window into the kingdom of heaven. We are people of the book, followers of a God whose word contains the power of creation and whose written words formed a covenant people. We name as Lord the one who is called the Word of God. So when we are called to be disciples of Jesus, we submit to being shaped by this marvelous, mysterious, strange and wonderful book which we believe was written by humans who were inspired by the Holy Spirit. And we pray that the same Spirit will be present as we read the words on the page and seek understanding of their message for our life today.

I love the Bible. Someday I may love it as much as the writer of Psalm 119. For 176 verses, Psalm 119 extols God's law, God's decrees, God's ways, God's statutes, ordinances, precepts, testimonies and word. And all those words are names for the Bible, the Torah, the book which reveals God to God's people. "God's Law" isn't restricted to the laws governing human behavior—it means all the ways God is revealed in the stories of our ancestors and found in the Bible. So right there in the middle of our Bible, there it is, a chapter devoted to praising the book itself. It's kind of like the reviews which publishers put on the back cover or the dust jacket of a book—"I love this book, and you will, too!"—except that I don't think it's in the Bible to promote sales. It's in the Bible to inspire our love of the Bible's wisdom and light and truth. It's there to give us a few words to describe the indescribable, the encounter with God which is possible when we read scripture.

Take the verse about the sweetness of the words—sweeter than honey to the taste! More than one biblical prophet symbolically "ate" God's word. Jeremiah ate God's words and Ezekiel swallowed a scroll so that they could speak the true message of God to God's people. Ezekiel said it tasted good—sweet as honey, in fact. And following their tradition, the writer of the Revelation, the last book of the Bible, ate a scroll given to him by an angel, and for him, too, the taste was sweet as honey.

The holy scriptures are sweet as honey to those who read them seeking God. Billy Graham is found of saying that Bible is "God's love letter" to you and me. Yet without question it is not all sweetness and light, and not always easy to understand. How many of us have resolved to read the Bible, and started with the book of Genesis, made it through Exodus despite the long descriptions of the tabernacle and instructions to the priests, only to get totally discouraged by Leviticus and its endless laws about burnt offerings and sin offerings and grain offerings—and give up! It's not all equally accessible nor does it all have obvious application to life today. But if we are to follow Eugene Peterson's advice to "eat

this book” and approach the Bible as a dog approaches a bone, something to be gnawed and savored, turned over and enjoyed, if we are to read the Bible for nourishment for our spirits we need to learn a different sort of reading than reading a newspaper or a textbook or, heaven forbid, an instruction manual. Peterson calls this different sort of reading “participatory reading, receiving the words in such a way that they become interior to our lives, the rhythms and images becoming practices of prayer, acts of obedience, ways of love.” (*Eat This Book*, 2000, Eerdmans Grand Rapids, p. 10)

Let me suggest three possibilities for how to begin—this week—becoming a disciple who reads the Bible. If you like poetry, Psalm 119 could be your assignment this week—or this month. The goal is not to get through the Bible, but to take it in and digest it, let it nourish you. Read 8 verses a day, slowly, out loud, meditatively. There are 22 8-line stanzas, each corresponding to a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. As you read, ponder how deeply the psalmist loves the scriptures, and pray that you might love them in the same way.

Or if you prefer stories, then read the stories of Jesus. You could make your goal to read the gospel of Mark—again, not to get through it, but to hear the stories of Jesus as the story of our Lord and Savior. Mark doesn’t tell us directly his purpose in writing his gospel, but surely it’s something like Luke’s purpose—so that we might know the truth. So that we might be disciples of the true One from God. Take in those stories and words. Feed your soul.

Or if you feel a need to hear a word addressed to you personally, then I suggest one of the letters of the New Testament—Philippians, or 1 John, or perhaps Ephesians. Go slowly; ponder the mystery; read a study Bible’s notes to help you with the rough spots; pray for God’s light to shine on the intersection between the scriptures and your life. Expect to be encountered by the loving presence and the radical challenge of the living God!

And maybe ask a friend to read alongside you, so that you can hold each other accountable and help each other along the way. Maybe you don’t need to be physically together—you could just check in with one another, or have a phone or email conversation about what you are reading and what it’s telling you. The choice to be a disciple of Christ is a personal one, but it is never a solo journey. We travel together. We care for one another. And we share in the feast which God has prepared for us, the sweet-as-honey, savory-as-a-dog’s-bone, meaty meal of holy scripture which nourishes our discipleship.

This is the third week—do you know yet three marks of discipleship, three practices which help us grow as followers of Jesus Christ? Daily prayer, weekly worship, regular reading of the Bible. They’re not so hard, they just take a little discipline. Teach your children, and your children’s children, and your spiritual children, which could be anyone. Do them yourself. And I guarantee, you will find yourself learning love, sharing faith, serving people, and celebrating God!!

Taste and see—the Lord is good! Happy are those who find their home in God!