

Last week we addressed the major arguments that people bring against the church. This was not to defend the church as perfect, because it most certainly isn't, but to defend it as precious. To show that while the church does not always look powerful, it is. While it does not always seem to be building toward a triumphant end, it has already been established. And all of this comes from the source. It isn't that the church is powerful in itself, it is wonderful because Jesus Himself loves the church, and is working in it:

that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

Ephesians 5.26-27

As the church, then, our focus, our life, our purpose is all about Jesus Christ and Him crucified. We have nothing else to offer. And so I ended last week by stating that:

the church exists to help people know God better and rely on Him more fully.

This week we will look at the fact that is not that it is only important THAT we come to God but HOW we come to God.

The common belief that the paths to God are many. It's like the interstate in LA, with highways constantly merging in. That if we simply seek God, we will find Him. The problem is that human beings don't know where to look. And so you see people trying to find God (or an idea of god) through a multitude of avenues.

1. Spirituality: the attempt to encounter god through inner focus

It comes from a belief that our inner being is untouched by sin.

2. Religious ritualism: the attempt to encounter god through methodology

It comes from the belief that our work is untouched by sin.

3. Christian Liberalism: the attempt to encounter god through our reason

It is a belief that intelligence is untouched by sin.

I left these definitions a bit wide because I think it easy for us to witness the extreme cases of this and excuse us from the fact that we actually have some of

the same presuppositions. While we can point fingers at the spirituality of Kabbalah, the works-based righteousness of the Pharisees, and the intellectual high ground of the wise of this world (**1 Corinthians 1**), we are not free from the same dependence on ourselves. We want someone to give us the secret methods of growth, the perfect evangelism techniques, the emotional highs. We want the same shortcuts to God that derail others. We want to find Him on our own terms, by our own means. We want to feel like we have done something in this transaction. But the Bible tells us that we bring nothing into our salvation but sin. Our part is not to find God by our own means to meet Him in His. We need to become part of God's story rather than inviting Him into ours.

But how do we do that?

In **Mark 10**, we see Jesus teaching His disciples, and in the midst of teaching people were bringing their children forward to see Jesus. The disciples found this to be somewhat obnoxious, and attempted to put a stop to this distracting event. But Jesus rebuked them and told them to let the kids come. Why? Because Jesus loved kids? He did, but He goes beyond just saying that kids are wonderful or cute, or fun, He says:

Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.

So in order to become part of God's family, to receive the Kingdom of God, we must become like children. We must have faith like a child. But what does that mean?

Well, kids are trusting. They take things at face value. And this can be a dangerous thing. We have to teach kids stranger danger, because otherwise they would simply follow some guy with a creepy mustache into a van with tinted windows. This is the negative aspect of a child's faith: NAIVETY. This is what parents are there to protect their kids from. As parents, we build into our children a sense of distrust and fear of things that is not there initially.

This weakness is also their strength. When it comes to truth, kids don't have the cynical hesitant belief that adults do. When I tell my son that God made the world in 6 days, he doesn't worry about whether or not that jives with his understanding of science. When I tell my son he has to submit to and obey his

mother, he may not want to (kids are not inherently good), but he does not question the validity of the truth.

Some of this may be gullibility, the inability to process information properly, but the other part of this is a trust in me, his father. My son has no reason to believe that I would lie to him, at least not about things that matter. As a child, my son recognizes the limitations of his ability to know things. When kids are little they believe in their own limitations, it isn't until we get older that we begin to believe that we have things figured out. That we can trust ourselves. This is why Jesus tells us that we need to believe like children, so we can turn to our Loving Father in heaven and fully trust what He tells us.

But maybe you are not overconfident in your ability to reason. RELATIVISM. Maybe you have put on a perspective that says,

I am not the bearer of all things true, but neither are you...we both have a piece of the truth and should be able to coexist...we simply believe different pieces of the same God.

This has been describes through the analogy of the blind men and the elephant. If you have ever heard this, it is the idea that there are four blind men, each at different parts of the elephant. One feels the trunk and describes it, one the ear, one the stomach, and one the leg. The take away is that we are all blind men seeing partially, and so none of us are fully right, none of us are fully wrong. If we rely fully on ourselves it rings true. None of us has more than our own perspective, our own brains to trust. What we need is for the creator of the elephant to write down for us what the elephant looks like, so that even as we have limited sight we could depend fully on the perfect sight of the creator.

Which brings us to the focus of our study today: the Word of God. As we have seen:

1. The Bible is our path to God. The way that He introduces us to Himself and shows us how we can step out of our life and into the life He offers us.

2. It is the words of a loving father to His children, as He shows us how to act, how to avoid pitfalls, and how ultimately have a relationship with Him.

3. It is the illuminating truth given to us by the creator. It is the declaration of how things function by the God who created it to function.

As another pastor eloquently defined this three part perspective of Scripture:

God's Word is His powerful, authoritative, self-expression.

That is the nature of Scripture. But it is also what Scripture does.

POWER

The Word of God is powerful because it does powerful things. In Genesis 1, we see that it is by the Word of God that creation comes into existence. The world is not created by a snap of the fingers or a movement of His hand...it is by His voice. Each day of creation begins with the phrase: AND GOD SAID.

God's Word created but it also sustains. It is by His Word that the earth functions. **Psalm 147.15-18** states:

*He sends out his command to the earth;
his word runs swiftly.
He gives snow like wool;
he scatters frost like ashes.
He hurls down his crystals of ice like crumbs;
who can stand before his cold?
He sends out his word, and melts them;
he makes his wind blow and the waters flow.*

The world, then, was not just created to function in a certain way, but it continues to be upheld and continues to be the power of God's Word by which creation operates. We see this when Jesus was on earth. He is out on a boat with His disciples and a great storm hits. They are terrified; He is asleep. They wake Jesus up and He raises His voice and says, PEACE, BE STILL. The waves stop. The same voice that calls the storm can also tell it to shut up.

The greatest display of the power of the Word is in how it brings us to New Life. It is not only the source of our living breathing life, but also the means by which we are called out of our sinful state and back to God.

In **Ezekiel 37**, God tells the prophet to preach at a pile of dry bones. So he does. And the bones came to life. That which had died was now brought back to life by the proclamation of the Word of God. And God tells Ezekiel:

you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people.

It is by the power of God's Word that people are made new. We don't think of the Bible this way. We see a book. We see words on a page. We don't truly get that these words are living. They are actively working. The words of the Bible do not contain the power of God, they are the power. It is not a record of God's saving plan, it is a part of the plan itself. And just as it is both creator and sustainer of the physical world, it is also the creator and sustainer of our spiritual lives.

Hebrews 4.12 tells us:

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

The Word of God builds and shapes our new life in Christ, but it also identifies and cuts out the sin. It convicts us of where we do not line up with God and it is the very weapon by which we fight. In Ephesians 6, as Paul lays out the ARMOR OF GOD, there is only one offensive weapon: THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT, WHICH IS THE WORD OF GOD. Everything else is protection, but the Word of God is the power.

If the Word of God is truly the power that it claims that it is, then we should be taking the opportunity to spend time in it. To let it change us. We should be proclaiming its truth to everyone we know. We should be using the weapon that God gave us to fight back against our sin. Otherwise what are we doing? Otherwise, we are trying to be Christians without the only power we actually have, which is where we began with Spirituality, religious ritualism, and Christian liberalism. It is like running out into the battle without a sword, not because one wasn't given to you, but because you think you can do better without it. IT IS NECESSARY.

AUTHORITY

The Bible is authority. The authority comes by nature of the fact that it is what God has recorded for us to know. It is not just God's Word by name, it is actually the words of God. **2 Peter 1.19-21** states:

And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

So if the Bible contains the truth as God, the source of truth, sees it, than we must approach it in that way. We must read our Bible as, if we believe in our own sinfulness, the only way to know truth. The beginning of ALL thought.

Again, most of us don't read the Bible this way. We don't read it like the treasure that it is. Instead, we read it to confirm what we thought when we came to it. When we do that, we once again find a way to make God's Word subservient to us. It either, agrees with our view of things and justifies are beliefs, OR it disagrees with our preconceived notions and we are then faced with a real dilemma. That's where the rubber hits the road.

I'll take a very specific and controversial example: homosexuality. Our society has begun to accept it more and more, Hollywood will call you names for standing against it, and our state is now calling it normal by allowing gay marriage. But what does the Bible say...because the Bible speaks on it. And not just in the Old Testament in a way that people feel like they can discount. In **Romans 1.26-27** it says:

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

If we read the Bible as authority...as the authority it says it is, than we need to call sin what God calls sin. And it isn't like the verse is unclear or could be

talking about something else, or may be taken out of context. Homosexuality is sin. It is not love. God does condemn it. And in case you feel like it is okay to waffle on it and be neutral and hey, I'm not the one doing it, the last verse of this chapter says:

Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

In other words God is grouping together both those who practice such things AND THOSE WHO APPROVE IT. So be careful reading your socially evolved, more progressive than thou, modern person into the Bible. You don't have the right. You are not God. And recognize that while we change, things that were not okay become okay and things that were accepted become abominations, GOD DOES NOT CHANGE. He is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. And His truth is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. It was true then, it is true now, and it will always be true. THE BIBLE IS THE WAY BY WHICH HE MAKES HIS TRUTH CLEAR TO US.

SELF EXPRESSION

AND it is the means by which we know Him. We call this God's self-expression. Our God is a Holy God, a God who is other. This otherness coupled with our sin makes it impossible for us to comprehend or experience God in His fullness. And so, He has created a way to express Himself to us in His Word. I have heard people say that it is because language is limited that we cannot know God fully, but God created language. So it is not that language caused a barrier that God could not overcome in describing Himself to us. Instead, THE BIBLE DESCRIBES GOD EXACTLY AS GOD WANTS TO BE KNOWN.

In Scripture, we see The WILL of God unfolding, The CHARACTER of God, the BEAUTY of God, the WORK of God. In the Bible God introduces Himself to us through the story of how He worked through human history to bring His people back to Himself. I say back, because His people are a group so ravaged by sin and folly that they have chosen to walk away from Him. Again and Again. They have seen Him do marvelous things and they choose instead to pursue their own power; they choose to be their own authority.

This story comes to its fullness in the life of Jesus Christ. It is in Him that we see God most fully. Hebrews 1 tells us:

He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.

So when we see Jesus, we see God. And when we read the account of the gospel, we are not just reading a historical story of something that happened that we can apply to our lives, WE ARE BE SPOKEN TO BY GOD ABOUT WHO HE IS. It is God introducing Himself to us, through His Words. He doesn't stop at the introduction. He makes relationship possible by covering the sin in our life with the perfect sacrifice of Jesus. Once that relationship has been restored, we have a personal relationship with the powerful, authoritative God of the universe. Who is at this moment upholding the world and the church by His Word.

DOCTRINE

In 1 Timothy 3, Paul shows us how the church is supposed to relate to the Bible.

I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. 1 Timothy 3.14-15

Paul uses two different ideas to describe the church and both have huge implications for how we as a church 'use' Scripture: HOUSEHOLD OF GOD, PILLAR AND BUTTRESS OF THR TRUTH.

As the household of God, as a church family, we have household rules. As Paul states here, I write these things *so that you know how you ought to behave*. The church is an organized entity then, set up a specific way in order to display the character of the God we serve. This verse comes after a description of the qualifications of elders and deacons, which we will deal with next week, and how the gathered assembly ought to function. We are not just here for our benefit, and so we don't get to just do whatever we think seems good. Our liturgy, how we organize our service, is listed on the back of the bulletin with some verses that refer to why we do these things. Our gathering is a model for our lives, as it submits to the authority of God's Word, worships Him as He

reveals Himself to be worshipped, trusts in Him to work through this in His power.

The second analogy for the church here is a PILLAR AND BUTTRESS OF TRUTH. As a former architect, this one gets me excited. I considered putting together a slide show, but thought better of it. But this comes from the idea of the people of God as a building, that He is building up to display His glory. Last week we looked at the foundation of the prophets, and the chief cornerstone Jesus Christ, but we didn't really look at what made up the rest of the building. We never really described what part we played. Paul tells us that the CHURCH is the pillar and buttress of truth. In buildings, pillars hold up the ceilings, a buttress holds up the walls. If you have ever seen a photo of Notre Dame cathedral from the other side of the Seine river, not the view from the front with the towers and rose window, but from the back, you see all of these pieces that extended down to the ground. Those are the flying buttresses. It is a support piece to give the wall additional support. In this we see that our part as the church is not to provide the beauty. It isn't to be the part of the building that people look at; it's to hold up what really matters.

So what does this mean. I spent the majority of the time today giving you the nature and function of the Word of God. I did this because before we know how relate to the Bible, we need to know what it is: Jesus is described to us as THE WORD. It is through the word that He displays His power. It is through is Word that He exercises His authority. It is through His Word that He speaks to his people. All of that is contained in here. This is the power, authority and message that we have for the world. THIS IS ALL WE HAVE TO OFFER.

The role of the church, then, is to ALLOW THE WORD OF GOD TO SHINE. It means we put it out there. It is the salt on our tongues. It informs the way that we live. It changes the way that we think. But in the end, our works, the things we do as the church, the light of the world that we are to be, mean little if they aren't used to SUPPORT and make known the greatness of our God.

It is true as a gathered church, and it is true for each one of us as believers. Are you more overwhelmed by the gospel, or by what Jesus does for you? Are you more excited about having the power, or having Jesus? Are you more enamored about being able to carry the authority, or about submitting to that authority? Are

do you spend all of your time looking at the model that Jesus gave us, or do you realize that the greatest gift is that we receive Him?

It may seem like simple things. It may seem like a nuance. But the greatest danger for us as a church AND as individuals is to elevate the things of God above God Himself. Don't be deceived, we are ALL constantly doing this. No man has ever mastered it. It is why we need each other to point to those missteps. It is why we gather to reorient our week around the Word and sacraments. It is why we need to remind ourselves of the Gospel every day. It's not a one time thing that we get figured out and move on from.

So I will end with God's powerful, authoritative self-expression of the gospel:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.