



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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No Longer Read the Bible? Mark 4:35-41; Romans 13

Some of you more fashion conscious gentlemen may have noticed that the May edition of *GQ* magazine included an article—or a series of opinion pieces—titled “21 Books You Don’t Have to Read.”¹ The premise of the feature was that there are a number of books that have always been included on the “must read” list for anyone wishing to be well-read. Some of those books, however, may be truly outdated, inappropriate, or simply boring. The editors asked a number of writers to suggest a book that is no longer a “must read” and to offer an alternate book that one ought to read.

Some of the rejected titles were surprises, classics like *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, and *The Catcher in the Rye*, books that most of us have known since adolescence. Most of the books mentioned were novels. A few were historical works. The one that is surely the most shocking on the list is the inclusion of the Bible. This is what author Jesse Ball, who picked the Bible for the list, had to say:

The Holy Bible is rated very highly by all the people who supposedly live by it but who in actuality have not read it. Those who have read it know there are some good parts, but overall it is certainly not the finest thing that man has ever produced. It is repetitive, self-contradictory, sententious, foolish, and even at times ill-intentioned.²

You can imagine that this article got swift response from a number of people and rightly so. Yet, can we ignore Mr. Ball’s allegations? First, he notes that the Bible is not actually read by most of the people who claim to live by it. I’m not going to ask for a show of hands, but I think if we are honest, few of us, myself included, actually read the Bible as much as we would like to or think we should. Can one be a believer, a Christian, and not read the Bible? I think so. Jesus called us to believe in him, not a book. He

¹The Editors of *GQ*, “21 Books You Don’t Have to Read,” *GQ* (May 2018); available online at: <https://www.gq.com/story/21-books-you-dont-have-to-read>.

²Jesse Ball in “21 Books You Don’t Have to Read.”

also called is to follow him in living faithfully. I also think that reading the Bible will help us to be better, more informed, enlightened, and prepared believers.

What about Mr. Ball's other allegations about the Bible? Is it repetitive? Absolutely. The primary way that ancient people recorded and shared information was orally. They told stories and related facts over and over. In the Bible, we have the benefit of learning about some events from different angles. In my estimation, that is a positive attribute.

Is the Bible self-contradictory? While the overall message of scripture does not contradict itself, there are stories that are told from different viewpoints with details that do not always match. I wonder how many of you will go home with different memories and perspectives of this sermon. You will all hear the same words, but as you filter what I say through your own thoughts and chase other ideas that might be prompted, none of you will identically recount what I say. The Bible was written by many different people who were inspired by God, but inspiration itself has a unique perspective. While some details of the same story do not always match, the message of the story is the same.

Is the Bible sententious, that is given to moralizing in an exaggerated way? The Bible certainly addresses morality from cover to cover. Sometimes, in an effort to point out our own proclivity to ignore how the teachings of scripture apply to us, a passage may seem "over the top." For instance, the familiar story of the woman caught in adultery is morality theater at its best. A lone woman crouches in the dirt sobbing from fear and shame. Surrounding her is a boisterous crowd ready to pelt her with stones for her offenses. Nearby is Jesus, also crouched on the ground, but doodling in the sand. The scribes and Pharisees challenge Jesus with the law of Moses which stated that the penalty for such a crime was stoning to death. Just before they begin hurling rocks, Jesus makes one simple statement: "Let the one who is without sin be the first to throw a stone." As we know, the crowd quickly disperses, leaving their stones and the woman alone in the dust (John 8). Dramatic? Yes. Effective? Obviously!

Is the Bible foolish? Without a doubt! Scripture tells us that in order to save our life we must lose it. It advises us to regard other people as more important than ourselves, to avoid hoarding our treasure on earth and instead invest in heavenly things. It tells us that we should be a neighbor to people who dislike, hate, and even abuse us and, even more foolish, that we should love our enemies. The Bible tells us that a man reported to be the Messiah

was crucified on a cross, died, his body placed in a tomb, and three days later he rose from the dead. Can you imagine anything more foolish to believe? The Apostle Paul stated it clearly when he said, “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (I Corinthians 1:18).

Is the Bible ill-intentioned? No. Students of the Bible know that scripture taken as a whole bears the message of God’s love for us all and the offer of salvation to all. Certainly, you can pull verses or passages out of context and twist them to suggest horrible things, but the intent of the Bible is to share God’s revelation of himself with us all and to impress upon us the height and depth and breadth of God’s love for us.

I don’t know whether or not Mr. Ball has actually read the Bible either. I do think he has some unfortunate misconceptions about it. First of all, the Bible itself is not really a book—it is a collection of books, a library of faith, if you will. Within this collection we find stories that grapple with our origin and destiny. We discover history, philosophy, wisdom, poetry, genealogy, law, adventure, intrigue, horror, war, peace, grief, joy, discovery, loss, despair, and hope. The Bible tells us about God and ourselves.

Admittedly, two of the reasons we often offer for not reading the Bible more is how boring and confusing some of it is, especially the “begats.” You know the begats, those endless lists of ancestry that contain names we cannot pronounce and people we do not know. Yet, those lists contain some hidden treasures and amazing facts! Last Sunday we heard about David the shepherd boy who was chosen by God to be the King of Israel. David was the son of Jesse the Bethlehemite who was the son of Obed. Do you know Obed’s parents? Ruth and Boaz. You know that story and you know that Ruth was not a Hebrew. She was a Moabitess who accompanied her mother-in-law Naomi back to Israel. King David’s great-grandmother was a foreigner. His great-great-grandmother was a woman named Rahab. Do you remember her? She was a prostitute who helped the Hebrew spies find a way to conquer Jericho when the former slaves came into the Promised Land.

Matthew tells us this information in one of the lists of “begats”—the lineage of Jesus—which begins his Gospel. These are important things to know when we begin to learn about Jesus who is touted by Matthew as a direct descendent of King David. These are important things to know about ourselves since we claim spiritual kinship with Jesus.

For us and for all who believe in God, the Bible is not just a book on the shelf or the beside table. It is sacred to us. We often refer to it as the “Word of God,” since we believe that God inspired the writings it contains and is the source of the revelations that we have received. There is, however, an important distinction to be made when using this term “Word of God.” There is the written word of God which we find in the pages of the Bible. It is the record of God’s revelation of himself to humanity. It is the story of God’s relationship with his, God’s children.

More important, however, is the Living Word of God who is Jesus Christ, God Incarnate. John stated it this way:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. John 1:1-5

The Living Word of God is the means by which we understand the written word of God. In his teaching, parables, and sermons, Jesus did his best to help people understand what the Hebrew scriptures said and meant. Obviously, at that time none of the New Testament writings existed. Jesus explained how the prophecies were fulfilled in him. He offered a fresh and relevant understanding of how the law spoke to their day and time. He explored the ways in which the spirit of God’s law is always operational even when the written letter of the law applies to a time long ago. It is through the lens of Christ that we read and interpret scripture.

As Baptist Christians, along with most Protestants, we believe in the right and responsibility of the individual believer to interpret scripture with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. For long years, it was the Church and her priests, bishops, and popes who interpreted the Bible for the vast majority of people who could not read it for themselves. Such a practice opened clergy and laity to the abuse of privilege and power. Martin Luther and other reformers placed the Bible in the hands of the people and invited them into a sacred relationship with scripture.

We should never use any of Mr. Ball’s excuses for not reading and engaging with the Bible, especially the one of not understanding what the Bible is saying. How many of us fully understand everything about the cell

phones that we use every day? Yet we use them and constantly discover new features that we can use day by day. A couple of weeks ago, I discovered that there is a level app on my phone. When hanging a picture, I know longer have to go hunt my bubble level. I can use my phone. How many of you understand all of the features on your cars? Do you really trust those self parking, self driving components? Over time, however, we will learn to trust and use them. If we are willing to learn in other areas of our lives, why not be willing to learn in the most important aspect of our lives? The Bible is not beyond our understanding! It is a great privilege to have this book and to be able to read it, think about it, study it, puzzle over it, discuss it, and live by it. We also have a great responsibility not to abuse that privilege.

In speaking to his friends in Ephesus about the resources God provides for us in order to live faithfully, he creatively describes them as spiritual armor. "Take the helmet of salvation," he writes, "and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." He is speaking of the prophecies through which God has spoken to us, but he is not suggesting that we use scripture as a weapon to cause harm. It is our primary resource in our spiritual struggles on earth. We must be careful, however, not to use it inappropriately.

Our current immigration dilemma is a perfect example. When Attorney General Sessions spoke a couple of weeks ago about the policy of separating children from their parents who had illegally crossed the border into the United States, he decided to go to scripture for backup.

Many Christian leaders, pastors, and people had been protesting the policy which many of us considered inhumane. Concerned about the policy but not about its effects, Mr. Sessions quoted the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans. He said, "I would cite to you the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13 to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained them for the purpose of order. Orderly and lawful processes are good in themselves and protect the weak and lawful."³

His message was, in essence, for protesters to stop complaining about this matter. God has set up this government to do his bidding and you need to get on board. The problem with his argument is that first, he spoke only to

³Julie Zauzmer and Keith McMillan, "Sessions Cites Bible Passage Used to Defend Slavery in Defense of Separating Immigrant Families," *The Washington Post* (June 15, 2018); available online at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2018/06/14/jeff-sessions-points-to-the-bible-in-defense-of-separating-immigrant-families/?utm_term=.88637460d807.

the protests and not to the reason for the protests and, second, it was an abusive and gross misuse of scripture.

Had Mr. Sessions, a Methodist, studied his Bible and read it carefully in order to inform his faith, he would have discovered that Paul wrote his letter to the churches in Rome during a vastly different time. In those days, the structure of family and government systems was the same and accepted by everyone. There was the father (or emperor), the family from mother to children (Roman citizens), and extended members of the household (foreigners, slaves). Until the Enlightenment, most people saw such a topdown view of life as normative and ordained by God. Therefore, for Paul, Christians living in Rome could expect protection from the Empire as long as they did not threaten it. As an example, Jews living peacefully in Rome had no trouble while rebellious Jews in Palestine were fought without mercy. Paying one's taxes while offering respect and honor to authorities were the obligations of any and all citizens. Keep in mind, however, that this opinion by Paul is not necessarily a "Christian" directive. It is his reminder to believers of the accepted way of life in that time and place.⁴

Professor Luke Timothy Johnson offers wise counsel regarding the use of this passage to demand obedience to present-day authority when he writes:

Even when all that is said, Romans 13:1-7 has had such a negative history of interpretation and has been put to such wrong use that it remains a passage that must be engaged with considerable delicacy and caution. Simply "reading it off the page" as a directive for life is to misread it and to distort it, for the world in which it made self-evident sense no longer exists and never can again.⁵

In our own reading of scripture, we discover that the previous chapter in Paul's letter is all about the law of God which is the law of love and so is the remainder of chapter 13 where Paul says, "The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your

⁴Luke Timothy Johnson, *Reading Romans: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2012); accessed online at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/518c65fee4b0887d9a39138d/t/58e098931b631bf0ffd79157/1491114131487/Romans+13.1-7.pdf>.

⁵Johnson.

neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:9-10). Everything Paul writes before and after the verses about obeying the government is about God’s supreme law of loving one another.

Reading the Bible leads us to discover that scripture—both the Old and New Testaments—speaks far more often about welcoming the stranger, treating the foreigner with kindness and respect, and remembering that the Hebrew people themselves were refugees from slavery and abuse. Even if we were to skip the genealogy which begins Matthew’s gospel, a brief chapter and a half of reading reveals that Jesus and his family escaped the murderous sword of Herod and sought refuge in Egypt before returning to Nazareth.

Mr. Sessions could have said, “To my fellow believers who are concerned about this policy of separating immigrant children from their families, I recognize that the wisdom of scripture addresses this issue and is important to you. Please know that we take this matter seriously and commit to work diligently to find the best humanitarian solution that will be in keeping with our nation’s heritage while at the same time addressing the real dangers and challenges that come with immigration.” If he had done so, people of faith like you and me would have been assured that we were being heard. Instead, the scriptures we hold dear were used to intimidate, suppress, silence, and negate a genuine humanitarian protest.

During Paul’s time or any time, the one thing which neither the father nor the emperor nor anyone else could control was an individual’s conscience. In those days, it could be assumed that God might use the Emperor to carry out God’s work in the world. If the Emperor acted against God’s wishes, however, no obedience, respect or honor were due whatsoever.

The Bible tells us that Paul himself was not fully submissive to Roman law. He persisted in preaching and teaching and was numerous times imprisoned, lashed, beaten, and perhaps even forced to fight wild animals (II Corinthians 11; I Corinthians 15). Paul was a Roman citizen and enjoyed certain privileges, but he obviously did not believe in blind obedience to Roman law, especially when it contradicted God’s law of love.

Issues such as immigration reform are like dark storms that sweep over us, distorting our perception, frustrating our attempts to get to safety, and

putting everyone at risk. Our Bible tells us of that occasion when Jesus and his friends were on the sea and a violent storm threatened to send them all into the water. Unperturbed, Jesus was asleep until the disciples woke him in a panic. With a word that possessed the power that comes only with being the Lord of Life, Jesus calmed the storm and they were back on course. We know this story because it is in our Bible. We have read it, puzzled over it, and used it to bring calm to our lives. Through this story, the Bible teaches us that we can depend upon God's power to keep us safe as we maneuver sometimes stormy waters as individuals or as a nation. If we allow it, God can guide us to the best solutions for all of our stormy situations.

No longer read the Bible? How absurd. The Bible tells us about God and about ourselves. It tells us about Jesus and his ancestors, all of whom were not stellar citizens but were regular folks like us whom God used to move his story forward. God loved them and God loves us. How do we know that? As the song says,

Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.
Little ones to him belong; they are weak, but he is strong.⁶

The Bible tells us who we are, whose we are, and how we are to live together so that we all enjoy a life that is full and complete. I think those are good reasons to keep reading. Amen.

⁶"Jesus Loves Me!," Anna Bartlett Warner (1859).

June 24, 2018

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

O God, who has claimed us as your own children and called us to live as brothers and sisters to one another, who is as close as our own heartbeat yet remains a mystery far beyond our comprehension, who has called us as partners in your work of loving and redeeming the world, we come to worship you each week bringing a myriad of experiences and emotions, joys and worries, thoughts and questions that make us who we are. We know that you have created us in your image and continue to speak to us through the people and circumstances of our lives as you mold us into the image of Christ. Our life of faith is guided by your call to discipleship and service, where we are challenged to live humbly and give sacrificially after the example of Christ who gave himself for us and for the world you love. We are energized by the possibilities that come our way, perplexed by the troubles, saddened by the losses, astounded by the blessings. In all things, Loving God, we are grateful for the good gifts which are ours daily, recognizing that they come from your generous hand.

And we recognize, too, O God, our Creator, Redeemer and Friend, that one of the extraordinary gifts we receive is the opportunity to serve others. The problems in our world, across our community, throughout the Body of Christ, and within our own families are enormous. We often feel inadequate or depleted in the face of them, and it seems easier to abandon our responsibilities out of apathy or skepticism or fear. But in your infinite compassion and mercy, O God, you have blessed us that we might be a blessing to others. Grant us the grace to meet these challenges with creativity and courage. Empower us to work as healers in the midst of suffering. Equip us to become messengers of peace where there is violence. Teach us to demonstrate love where there is hatred. Help us to live generously where we find need. In all the circumstances that we face, in all of the ways that you call us, may we shine your light and life into the dark and dying places of our world. We pray in the name of the One who is your Word which became flesh in order to embody your grace and truth, the One before whom every knee should bend in reverence and praise, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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