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“Reading the Bible with a Redemptive Focus”

Scripture Text: 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Dear people of God, I’m a member of a Christian Book Club. Every month they send me the latest catalog of books. They always have a huge assortment of Bibles. In addition to the Bibles that I showed the children this morning during Children’s Time, let me name a few more Bibles that are available: the New King James Version Baptist Study Edition, the King James Version Life in the Spirit Study Bible, the Devotional Bible for Women, Breast Cancer Edition, in pink leather of course, the Extreme Teen Study Bible, the New King James Version American Patriot’s Bible, the New International Version Outdoorsman Bible, the African Heritage Study Bible, and, I’m not making this up, the Zombie Bible, whose purpose is to add zombies anywhere in the Bible they can fit. An example is their rendition of John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he made His Son a zombie, and whoever is bitten by the Son shall also become a zombie and be undead everlasting.” And there are hundreds of more Bibles that are packaged in these different ways to try to appeal to a

diverse group of people. But they're all the same Bible, well, mostly, I don't know about that Zombie Bible. Most of them are even the same translation of the Bible. Is the Bible different for Baptists than it is for Congregationalists? Is the Bible different for women than for men? Is the Bible different for white persons than it is for black persons? Must we highlight those passages in the Bible that talk about our favorite theological subject, such as the end times and prophecy, which many of them do, including the best-selling Bible of all time, the Scofield Reference Bible?

Those of you who are confused when you read the Bible, I don't blame you. Purchasing a Bible these days is a lot of work. You not only need to know the English translation you want, but apparently, you need to know from what theological perspective the margin notes are written, and what your racial and ethnic origin is. Only after determining these issues can you supposedly find the Bible that is right for you. This would be comical if it weren't so serious a matter.

The irony in all of this is that though we have more opportunities today than ever before to read the Bible in the translation we want and from the theological perspective we want, ignorance of the Bible is at an all-time high in this country. For the best-selling book of all time, found

in over 90% of all households--and more than half of all households have more than one--the Bible is indeed a much neglected book.

If I were to ask, how many of you regularly read the Bible, not counting when we are in church, how many of you would raise your hand? How many of you can name the four Gospels or the Ten Commandments or know where to locate “God helps those who help themselves?” That last one was a trick question. “God helps those who help themselves” isn’t found in the Bible. It was said by Benjamin Franklin. How many of you knew that? If we are to believe some of the opinion polls, less than 10% of Americans are able to answer these questions, less than 10%! This is incredible considering that 85% of Americans claim to believe in the God who is talked about in the Bible. It makes us wonder. Do Americans know the God who they claim to believe in, or are they fooling themselves?

What is even more bewildering is that an overwhelming majority of Americans, according to the polls, believes that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. You would think that if people really believe that the Bible is God’s Word that can help them in their daily lives, they would make sure that they read it daily. How many of you read the Bible daily? How does the frequency of your reading the Bible compare with how often you

read the newspaper? Or how often you go on the Internet? Or how often you read your email? I can tell from the emails that I send some people that they must check their email every 5 minutes. I appreciate that they get back to me so quickly. On the other hand, I wonder what kind of quality of life they have that they are obsessed with checking their email.

If I were to visit you at home and ask you to go get your Bible, how long would it take you to find it? Is it sitting in the middle of some forgotten pile of books in the basement? Or maybe you keep it on your bedside table for emergencies like you would a flashlight in the drawer. For those of you who know exactly where your Bible is, do you just let it lie there, unopened and unused? Regardless of what we confess to believe about the Bible, if we don't read it, then it's of no more use to us than any other book, a lifeless collection of pages. Even if we display it prominently, it's no more useful than a piece of furniture that decorates our dwelling.

What is it that keeps us from opening those pages that were penned between two and three thousand years ago? I think that deep within our hearts, many of us truly believe that the Bible does indeed contain the Word of God, is unique among all books, and divinely inspired. I believe that we sincerely expect when we open the Bible to be confronted with

something wonderful, with the very words of God, not just the God who spoke once in some ancient time and place, but the God who actually speaks today to our time and our personal situations.

It seems that when we were children, we were much more fascinated with the biblical stories. Open up the Bible with a little child and let God show her for the first time how the world was created. Let God tell her about Noah and the gigantic boat that housed all the animals, about the shepherd boy David fighting the giant Goliath, about the beautiful Esther becoming queen and saving her people. Then tell her about God's only begotten Son, Jesus, about all the strange people that Jesus encountered, John the Baptist, Zacchaeus, Mary Magdalene, all those with infirmities whom Jesus healed. Then as God lets the good news of the gospel message unfold--the story of love and redemption and forgiveness of sins--let God tell her about how Jesus loved her so much that he died for her. Let God tell her the story through the words of the scriptures, and remember how the story sounded so marvelous when you first heard it as a child. But when you hear it again now, has it lost something of its magic?

What has happened over the years? As we have grown up, have we become too sophisticated for the biblical stories? Or do we find many

scriptural passages too difficult to understand? Do we find many stories in the Bible embarrassing? Perhaps we answer, “Yes,” to all three questions.

Part of spiritual maturity is realizing that the Bible cannot always be taken literally. But that complicates things, doesn't it? How do we know what to take literally and what not? Did God create the universe in six literal 24-hour days? Did the Red Sea literally part when Moses lifted up his staff and stretched out his hands? Did Jesus literally rise from the dead after three days? Was it even three days, or was it more like between 36 and 39 hours? I'm sure that each of you has at one time or another asked these questions.

I sympathize with those of you who refrain from reading the Bible because you don't understand it, simply cannot believe some of it, or are embarrassed by some parts of it, or. And so I'm going to try to help you in this regard. I'm convinced that the main reason that we misunderstand, cannot believe, or are embarrassed by the Bible is because we misinterpret it.

In our Confirmation Class right now, we're studying how to interpret the Bible, how we got our Bible, and the historical background to the biblical books. The young people are enjoying it very much. The first thing I tell the youth is that we cannot just open the Bible and start

reading and think that we'll be able to understand it. Like a detective, we must be searching for something when we read the scriptures. We must have a particular focus when we start reading it. The Bible contains a lot of history, but it's not a history textbook. The Bible contains a lot of geography, but it's not a geography textbook. The Bible contains a lot of science, but it's not a science textbook. And we know that the Bible contains a lot of ethics.

I might blow you away with what I'm about to say now, but the Bible is not a textbook of ethics or morality either. Unfortunately a lot of people read the Bible that way. The Bible for them is a bunch of rules to teach us good behavior. That's not the purpose of the Bible. God isn't interested in proper outward behavior. God is interested in your heart. God is interested in your soul. God wants to redeem, not your behavior, but you! God wants internal transformation. When that happens, your outward behavior will conform. But just changing your outward behavior means nothing to God. A lot of people look at God as the big police officer in the sky. As long as we outwardly conform, that's good enough. But that's not who God is. God wants to be the Lord of your life, your entire life. That means everything you do should be done with the intention of honoring God. Your conduct must flow out of your heart, out

of your soul, out of your mind, and out of your strength, in other words, out of your whole being. God is interested in redeeming or saving your whole person. God is interested in redeeming you, not just a part of you.

And so, the Bible's purpose is to instruct us in the way of redemption or salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Scripture has only one ultimate focus, only one. And that is to bring us to faith, or confirm our faith, in Jesus Christ. All of scripture, all of it, has only that one redemptive focus. The Bible is not merely a nice collection of interesting adventures or beautiful poetry. It wasn't written to give us fascinating information about people who lived a long time ago. Each one of you is a character in the Bible, as much as Abraham or Rachel or Moses or Paul. The Bible was written for each one of you just as much as it was written for the ancient Israelites or the first-century Corinthians.

And so we must approach scripture always with one question in mind: "How is that redemption which God provides displayed in this particular passage, in this particular book, in this particular story, in this particular commandment, in this particular psalm, or in this particular proverb?" And then when we have answered that question, we need to ask ourselves, "What is the redemptive message in that passage for us today, or to make it even more personal, for me today?" It may not be

the same thing that it was for the ancient Israelites of 3000 years ago. It may not be the same thing as it was for a church composed of Jews and Gentiles 2000 years ago? We claim that God is still speaking. God is still speaking through the Bible today. As followers of Jesus Christ, it is our task to discover the redemptive focus today for our own personal lives, for our church, for our society, and for the world.

Divine commandments in the Bible are directives, redemptive directives. They point to where we should go in our lives. They hold as general principles. How they are to be applied, however, must be determined by each one of us in faith according to our own circumstances. Every moment of our lives provides us with a unique situation, a new time, a new place, different persons, and different circumstances.

So, although a divine commandment, such as “Love your neighbor as yourself,” is always in effect, we must discern in faith how we are to apply that commandment in our lives. It’s not always so easy. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose picture you see in my office above my desk, was a devoted German pastor during the Nazi regime. He was a faithful follower of Jesus Christ and deeply committed to non-violence. Yet through much prayer and study of the Bible, he made the agonizing decision to take

part in a conspiracy to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Maybe none of you will ever need to make such a dreadful choice. But the Bible can give you guidance whether the decision you need to make is on the scale of Bonhoeffer's or on a more mundane level. God wants to bring redemption into your life. If you ask, God will show you how you can find that redemption in the Bible.

As you can see, I have only scratched the surface on this very important issue. These are the kinds of things we talk about in our Bible study every other Thursday evening. We will be meeting this Thursday at 7:00pm. Why not join us and learn what it means to have a redemptive focus on the Bible. Amen.