

Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
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## A WORD ABOUT THE WORD

### 2 Timothy 3:14-17

I don't read *GQ* magazine, and I don't advise you to read it either. But I want to tell you about an article *GQ* ran earlier this year with the title: "21 Books You Don't Have to Read (and 21 You Should Read Instead)". As the title suggests, the article names 21 books you shouldn't bother reading – actually 20 (it cites Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* twice on its "don't read" list) and offers alternatives for each one. Among the so-called "must reads" you don't need to bother with is a memoir by Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones. I'm not sure why it would be included in any list of essential reading in the first place, but I'm glad to know I don't have to read it in order to be hip in the eyes of *GQ*.

What really got my attention, though, is #12 on the *GQ* list of books you don't have to read, which is ... the Bible. Writing for *GQ*, novelist/poet Jesse Ball says: "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," he says, "know there are some good parts, but overall it is certainly not the finest thing man has ever produced. It is repetitive, self-contradictory, sententious" – which, according to the dictionary, means given to moralizing in a pompous manner; sanctimonious or judgmental, "foolish, and even at times ill-intentioned." These are harsh words. Instead of the Bible, Ball recommends *The Notebook* by Agota Kristof (not to be confused with Nicholas Sparks' love story with the same title). Kristof's novel, according to Ball, is "a marvelous tale of two brothers who have to get along when things get rough."

The book Ball recommends may or may not be worth reading. I don't know. But his attitude toward the Bible makes me sad – for him and for anyone who will take his critique seriously. It troubles me that he has such a jaded and misguided view of the Bible. Is he right that many people who claim to live by the Bible have never actually read it? Probably. Is he right in his judgment of the Bible? As one who believes the Bible to be the infallible Word of God, uniquely and fully inspired by the Holy Spirit, the supreme and final authority on all matters on which it speaks, as we say in the EPC *Essentials of Our Faith*, I believe Ball is wrong. Way wrong.

But I know he is not alone. I know he represents the views of many people in the world today (or else *GQ* would not have given him a platform to express these views). Many people in our culture do not like the Bible or its message. They view it as antiquated (and therefore irrelevant at best), "foolish" as Ball says, or even harmful, if taken seriously. That many in our culture are dead set against the Bible – opposed to its message and its claims of authority – is a fact of life. It is the way it is in the world today.

But we who profess to be followers of Jesus see the Bible differently. We *must* see the Bible differently. We *must* take the Bible seriously. We *must* accept the Bible's authority and submit to it willingly and with humility, because of what God Himself tells us *about* His word in His Word.

Last Sunday, we looked together at Philippians 3:7-14 and the call to go forward in our lives as followers of the Lord Jesus, embracing Paul's desire to "press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called (us) heavenward in Christ Jesus" (3:14). You may recall that I asked the questions:

- How do you go forward in your spiritual life?
- How do you go forward in developing and deepening your relationship with God?

I offered several answers to these questions, including these:

- You go forward in your life as a Christian by spending time with the Bible daily, allowing God to speak to you, teach you, direct you, shape you, and change you through His Word.
- You go forward by availing yourself of the spiritual nourishment found in God's Word.

Contrary to what *GQ* magazine may want you to believe, I believe the Bible is essential to your spiritual health, vitality, and witness as a Christian, and to the health, vitality, and witness of the church in the world today.

The verses we read from 2 Timothy 3 – written shortly before Paul's death in Rome – contain "the Bible's most famous statement on the inspiration of Scripture" (R. Kent Hughes in Hughes and Bryan Chapell, *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus: To Guard the Deposit*, 258). What Paul refers to as "the holy Scriptures" in verse 15 and "all Scripture" in verse 16, I take to mean the Bible as a whole, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, the 66 books of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation that we affirm to be the Word of God.

Paul's statement on the inspiration of Scripture is set in the context of his appeal to Timothy (and, by extension, to *us*) to stand firm, to remain true, to be steadfast in his (and our) belief in and allegiance to the holy Scriptures in the midst of opposition from those whom Paul calls "evil men and impostors (who) go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived" (2 Timothy 3:13). There are plenty of them in the world today.

Paul's assertion in these verses, says Chuck Swindoll, "is *the* single most significant sentence in all the New Testament regarding the Scripture because it touches on *the* watershed issue of faith in our times. What you believe about the Bible influences everything you believe and affects every decision you make" (*Swindoll's New Testament Insights: 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus*, 219).

Swindoll is right. *The* watershed issue of faith in our time is what we believe about the Bible. Is it from God, or just a book of people's ideas about God? Is its message true? Is it reliable? Is it trustworthy? Is it inspired by God? Does it have any authority today? *Should* it have any authority? Is it relevant in today's world? Is it relevant in your life? Or mine? Or is it, as Jesse Ball asserts in *GQ*, "self-contradictory, sententious, foolish, and even ... ill-intentioned"?

Paul would argue vigorously against the views of Ball and *GQ*. Far from being foolish, he says in verse 15 that the Bible is a source of wisdom. The Scriptures, he says, "are able to

make (us) wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” What he means, as John Calvin points out, is that the wisdom necessary for salvation can be found only in the message of the Bible (Calvin, *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus*, 154).

The Book of Proverbs warns against seeking to be “wise in your own eyes” (3:7a). True wisdom, the Bible tells us, is found in God and His Word. True wisdom is seeing ourselves as God sees us. True wisdom is recognizing our need for God and His gracious intervention in our lives. True wisdom is recognizing that we are not autonomous. True wisdom is looking to God and trusting in Him to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. True wisdom is submitting willingly and with humility to His sovereign and gracious rule in our lives. True wisdom is accepting His authority and the authority of His Word in all matters of faith and life.

The wisdom necessary for salvation – to be made right with God – is found only in the Bible. It is only through the gospel message of faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ, who willingly took on our sin in His suffering and death on the cross, that we – or anyone – can be saved. This is true wisdom from God. As offensive as it is to some – and it *is* offensive to people in our post-modern world who believe that truth is “whatever you want it to be” – there is no other way to be made right with God. Jesus is the only way.

In verses 16 and 17, Paul addresses the nature (or origin) of Scripture and its purposes. First, he tells us where Scripture comes from. It comes from God. “All Scripture,” he says, in verse 16, “is God-breathed.” The word Paul uses here (*theopneustos*) is not found anywhere else in the New Testament. In fact, this is the first time the word is used anywhere in Greek literature. It is a compound of the words *Theos* (God) and *pneo* (to breathe). In some translations, it is rendered “inspired by God” instead of “God-breathed.” What Paul means for us to understand is that the Scriptures – (which, again, for us means the Old and New Testaments) – were “breathed out” by God.

Paul does not explain the *process* of inspiration. He does not tell us *how* God breathed out the Scriptures to the various biblical authors. The closest we come to an explanation of the process of biblical inspiration comes from 2 Peter 1, where Peter says: “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:16-21).

Exactly how they were “carried along by the Holy Spirit,” the Bible does not say. But in whatever way it took place, the process of inspiration did not destroy the individuality of the human writers. It did not remove human personality or make the human writers puppets manipulated by God. The human writers play an integral role as the agents through whom God breathed out His Word.

Paul asserts emphatically to Timothy (and to us) the fact of inspiration – that all Scripture is God-breathed. Meaning, as John Stott puts it: “It originated in God’s mind and was communicated from God’s mouth by God’s breath or Spirit. It is therefore rightly termed ‘the word of God,’ for God spoke it” (Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy*, 102).

Calvin says that the fact of the Bible's divine origin and inspiration is enough to establish its authority (Calvin, 155). If what Paul says is true, that "all Scripture is God-breathed" – inspired by the Holy Spirit – then the inspired word must be endowed with the authority of God Himself. Whether you accept it or choose to reject it, whether you recognize it or choose to rebel against it, the Bible continues to be the supreme and final authority in all matters on which it speaks, both in terms of what we are to believe and how we are to live, because it is the Word of God. Regardless of what others in our culture, or even our families, may say or do or believe, it must be our unwavering desire and goal, in humble reliance on the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, to believe and obey the Word of God in every area and detail of our lives.

Paul speaks not only of the origin or nature of God's Word. In the second part of verse 16, he speaks also of the purposes or functions of God's Word. It is "useful," he says – or profitable – in the following four ways: For 1) teaching; 2) rebuking; 3) correcting; and 4) training in righteousness. Does Paul mean that these four are the *only* purposes or functions of the Bible in our lives? I don't think so, though it is possible that other functions, such as comforting or giving hope may come under the umbrella of one or more of the four Paul identifies.

To say the Bible is useful or profitable is to say that there is tremendous benefit to be gained from it. *The Message* paraphrases verses 15 and 16 this way; "There's nothing like the written word of God for showing you the way to salvation in Christ Jesus. Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another – showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way."

Sometimes we need to be taught the truths – the doctrines and principles – of God's Word. We need to be taught what to believe (or not believe) and how to live (or not live) as God's people. Sometimes we need the rebuke of God's Word. That is, we need the Bible to show us the error of our thinking and the error of our ways. We need the Bible to show us where we are wrong in either doctrine or life. Both doctrine and life matter, as Paul says in 1 Timothy 4:16. We need the Bible to expose our sin, to convict us in our consciences and bring us to repentance.

Sometimes we need the Word of God to correct us when we have gone off the rails in either beliefs or behavior. We need the Word of God to straighten us out and to train us how to live godly lives, to put us on the right path and keep us on it.

I don't think I can explain it any better than John Stott, who writes that Scripture is profitable "precisely because it is inspired by God. Only its divine origin secures and explains its human profit." He notes that Paul uses two expressions to show what this profit is. The first is in verse 15, as we have already seen, where Paul says, in effect: "The sacred writings are able to instruct you for salvation."

"The Bible," says Stott, "is essentially a handbook of salvation. Its overarching purpose is to teach not facts of science ... which (we) can discover by (our) own empirical investigation, but facts of salvation, which no [amount of scientific investigation] can discover but only God can reveal. The whole Bible unfolds the divine (plan) of salvation – (humankind's) creation

in God's image, (our) fall through disobedience into sin and under judgment, God's continuing love for (us) in spite of (our) rebellion, God's eternal plan to save (us) through His covenant of grace, culminating in Christ; the coming of Christ as the Savior, who died to bear (our) sin, was raised from death, was exalted to heaven and sent the Holy Spirit; and (our) rescue first from guilt and alienation, then from bondage, and finally from mortality" in the sure and certain promise of our resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Not only does the Bible instruct us for salvation, it "instructs [us] for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." So, since the Bible is a book of salvation, and since salvation is through Christ, the Bible focuses its attention on Christ. The Old Testament foretells and foreshadows Him in many and various ways; the Gospels tell the story of His birth and life, His words and works, His death and resurrection; the Acts describe what He continued to do and teach through His chosen apostles, especially in spreading the gospel and establishing the church from Jerusalem to Rome; the Epistles display the full glory of His person and work, and apply it to the life of the Christian and the church; while the Revelation depicts Christ sharing the throne of God now and coming soon to consummate His salvation and judgment. This comprehensive (portrait) of Jesus Christ is intended to elicit our faith in Him, in order that by faith we may be saved" (Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy*, 102-103).

But the profit or benefit of Scripture doesn't end here. The benefits of God's Word, as Paul points out, have to do with both our creed and our conduct, our beliefs and our behavior, what we believe and how we live. "As for our creed," writes Stott, "Scripture is profitable for teaching the truth and refuting error" (NEB). As for our conduct, it is profitable "for reformation of manners and discipline in right living" (NEB). If we hope to overcome error and grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18), if we hope to overcome evil and grow in holy living, "then it is to Scripture that we must primarily turn, for Scripture is profitable for these things" (Stott, 103).

In fact, the Bible is the primary means God uses to bring us – to bring *you*, to bring *me*, to bring the *man* of God, to bring the *woman* of God, to bring every *child* of God, to bring every *servant* of God – to spiritual maturity (Stott, 103). You cannot expect to go forward in the Christian life, you cannot expect to grow toward maturity in your life as a Christian, if you do not regularly – daily – spend time reading or listening to God's Word and working it into your life.

Far from being a book you don't have to read, as *GQ* would have you think, the Bible is crucial to your spiritual well-being, and will be for as long as you live. If you think you can outgrow your need for the Bible, or that you *have* outgrown your need for it, you either think too little of the Bible, or too highly of yourself, or both. You can never outgrow your need for the Bible and its nourishment; its wisdom and direction; its comfort and convicting power; its teachings on what we are to believe and how we are to live; its revelation of God's character, His ways and will; and its message of grace and mercy and forgiveness for sinners. You can never outgrow your need for its truth and its transforming power.

The Bible, as French philosopher-theologian Emile Cailliet declared, is "the book that understands (us)." It is the book that understands us because its Author is the One who made

us, who fashioned us in His own image, who loves us with an everlasting love, and who spared no expense to redeem us and restore us to a right relationship with Himself when we fell into sin and wandered far from Him.

The Bible is the book that understands us because it tells the truth, and it tells the truth in love. It tells us the truth about God – about who God is and what He has done, about what He has said and what He desires of us. It tells us the truth about the world, about human nature and human destiny, about sin and suffering, about rebellion and redemption, about life and death, about right and wrong, about good and evil, about justice and mercy, about love and grace. It tells the truth about *us*. It tells us the meaning and purpose of life. It shows us what really matters in life and how to live life to the fullest.

There is a story about a 1<sup>st</sup>-century rabbi named Akiva that illustrates how God's Word works. Tending his sheep one day, Rabbi Akiva noticed a tiny stream trickling down a hillside, dripping over a ledge on its way toward a river below. On the ledge was a massive boulder that had a deep impression. The drip, drip, drip of water over the centuries had hollowed away the stone. Akiva thought: "If mere water can do this to hard rock, how much more can God's Word carve a way into my heart of flesh?" The rabbi realized that if the water had flowed over the rock all at once, the boulder would have been unchanged. It was the slow but steady impact of each droplet, year after year, that resulted in the change in the rock. (Adapted from Lois Tverberg, *Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus*.)

You see how this relates to the Bible, don't you? God doesn't give us the capacity to understand everything in His Word all at once. The Bible is not a book you only have to read once, and then you can move on to other things. Our hearts and minds are not equipped to take it all in, to process it and understand it and apply it, all at once. You have to keep reading it, processing it, and working it into your life. Through the slow drip of reading and meditating on God's Word day after day, week after week, year after year, decade after decade, God reveals more and more of Himself to us. He teaches us more and more of His truth. He shows us how His Word relates to life in ways we never noticed before. He shapes us more and more into His likeness.

Not only is the Bible not a "book you don't have to read," it is the book you've got to read and keep on reading. It is the book you – *we* – can't do without. So I implore you not to ignore or neglect the Bible in your daily life. Do not just give lip service to the importance of the Bible. Read it. Turn to it for spiritual nourishment and guidance every day. It is the sure foundation on which to build your life (Matthew 7:24-27). It is the manna from heaven. It is "an *indispensable* weapon" (Ephesians 6:17, *MSG*) in the spiritual battles we encounter in this world. *The indispensable weapon.*

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.