

Back to the Basics John 3: 1-17

Bible study is an essential part of the Lenten season, something that will bring us closer to God. But just as someone going to the gym for the first time might be intimidated by all the different exercise machines, at first glance the Bible can be an overwhelming book. Even so, like diet, exercise, or the gym we have to start somewhere. This book we call the Bible is not really a book but a collection of 66 books. It is divided in two parts, or two testaments or testimonies, Old and New. The OT is sometimes referred to as the Hebrew Bible, and you could think of it as the “pre-Jesus” part, the account of God’s people before Jesus Christ came to earth. It’s 39 books begins with Genesis and the history of creation and humanity and ends with Malachi, written around 400 years before the birth of Christ. It contains three major sections, the law, the prophets, and the Psalms.

After 400 years of silence, the NT account of God’s people after Jesus came to earth begins. It’s 27 books contains 4 gospels, or books of good news, 22 letters or epistles written to the early church and ends with a prophetic book called Revelation. If you are not sure where to begin, the Gospel of John is a great place to start. In fact, the apostle John tells us in chapter 20: 30-31 why he wrote it. “These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.” But even if the page where that verse is found was somehow missing from our Bibles, we would still conclude that was his purpose, for the word believe or belief is repeated nearly 100 times in its 21 chapters.

The reason we study Scripture is to discern a meaning and application for our life. It is helpful to look for words or phrases that are repeated and underline or highlight them. In this instance, John would have us recognize that nothing in life is more important than having belief or faith in Jesus Christ. It secures our place in the kingdom of heaven. Belief is not the only word we find repeated. John also carefully records for us two powerful words containing only 3 letters- 2 vowels and a consonant- that Jesus used to refer to Himself on at least twenty-three different occasions. They are the words “I am”. “I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world, I am the door of the sheep, I am the good shepherd, I am the resurrection and the life, I am the way, the truth, and the life, and I am the true vine.

Jesus chose those words “I Am” intentionally. His audience, very familiar with the powerful words God spoke to Moses in the OT: “I am who I am”, would have immediately recognized that Jesus was claiming to be God, the God of Abraham and Isaac, the God of Moses and Elijah, the True God, the Provider, the Way, the Truth and the Life, the One who guides, the One who restores, and the One who holds the keys of heaven and hell. In fact, it was those “I Am” claims that eventually led to His crucifixion and death on the cross. John would have us recognize that Jesus Christ is God Almighty.

Another thing to look for when studying a passage of Scripture are words or phrases that contrast with each other. There are several in John’s Gospel. Light and darkness, life and death, truth and deceit, flesh and spirit, belief, and unbelief. They are there to have us recognize that there are absolutes in life and absolutes in death, and perhaps to challenge us in our beliefs or even challenge us to believe. The Scriptures help us discern the things in life that are true and faithful and the things that are not. They illuminate the things that bring light and joy into the world while casting a shadow over things that bring darkness and despair. For instance, servanthood and generosity bring light and joy into the world, while greed and selfishness bring darkness and despair. In a world where we can trust little, we can have absolute confidence that the Scriptures portray an accurate and true reflection of God and of His will.

At times, the Scriptures will cause us to become uncomfortable in our sinfulness. When we encounter those troublesome passages that cause us to reflect upon our own tendency to be greedy or selfish, we tend to skip past them to something that is less challenging, lest we make an adjustment in our thinking or way of life. By doing so, we are not led to a deeper faith in Jesus, but to something called cafeteria Christianity. We will take some of this and some of that, while passing on that and refusing to even try this. That is a bad habit which must be broken. To put it another way a pair of scissors is not an appropriate Bible study tool. Like Nicodemus, we must learn to love basic Biblical absolutes if we are to grow in our faith.

Jesus brings us several in our Scripture lesson this morning.

3:3 3:5 3:13 3:14

And then we encounter one of the most beautiful absolutes in all the Scriptures: 3:16 God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that *everyone* who believes in him will not perish but will have eternal life. That is absolutely true, and there are no ifs, ands, buts or maybes involved. Jesus left heaven and came to earth to save people from their sins. A reflection of God's love, it was purposeful and intentional.

John 3:16 is not just a verse of Scripture but an absolute promise. God invites everyone to become part of His family. Everyone! It is an exact opposite of "no one". It is an invitation to have our sins forgiven in Christ and become part of the kingdom of God. It is our faith in Jesus that brings us forgiveness and gives us new life, indeed a new way of life, one that leads to eternal life. Note that no priest, no rabbi, no imam, no Buddha and certainly no pastor can save anyone from their sins. There is only one whom God has appointed and anointed to do the saving part and His name is Jesus-God's only Son.

God gave His Son Jesus Christ so that the world might be saved rather than condemned and then sent the Holy Spirit to help us to recognize and believe that truth. It is a mystery how that happens, but just as the wind leaves evidence it has been there the Holy Spirit does the same. The holy team of Father, Son, and Spirit each have an active role.

During this Lenten season, I encourage you to spend time in the Scriptures. Get back to the basics. Discover or rediscover the exclusive, inclusive, and absolute truth that Jesus loves you. It's exclusive in that Jesus alone offers new life and a room in a mansion with a view of eternity. It's inclusive in that it doesn't matter where you have been or what you have done Jesus will always love you and offers a chance to start over, a new birth, a new life in Christ. It is absolutely true: no one will have to remain in the dark if they choose to believe in Jesus. I pray we will make that truth known this week.

Praise God!!!! Amen

³ Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again^[b] he cannot see the kingdom of God."

⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.^[h]