



# The Scripture Practice

Teaching Notes

Practicing the Way

## Scripture Teaching 01:

# Read

### Intro hook:

- I was walking down Broad Street in the village of Oxford, England a few years ago.
- Every block was full of history. As I was exploring the village, I literally stepped on this stone cross set into the street.
- This is a memorial known as “Martyr’s Cross.” It marks the spot where Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and two other bishops were burned alive by Queen Mary in the English Reformation for “heretical teachings,” which, in fact, were *orthodox* teachings they had rediscovered by reading the first English translation of the Bible, paid for in blood by *another* martyr, William Tyndale.
- Tyndale was a linguist at nearby Cambridge University, who’s been called the father of modern English.
- Fluent in both Greek and Hebrew, when he read Scripture in its original languages, he came to a conclusion that we take for granted today, but was *radical* at the time: that every follower of Jesus should be able to read Scripture in their own language.
- But that was actually *illegal* in 16th-century England.
- The powers that be — both in the government and the church — thought Scripture was too dangerous to be put into the hands of ordinary people.
- So, Tyndale escaped to Germany.
- From exile, he translated the first-ever English edition of the New Testament.
- With the help of a wealthy patron who ran a shipping business, he smuggled 18,000 Bibles back across the Channel into England.
- Followers of Jesus would hold secret meetings in homes, where they would read the Bible out loud, many of them hearing it for the first time.
- Henry VIII, the King of England, was enraged. He bought 6,000 copies through a spy and had them burned *on the steps of Saint Paul’s Cathedral*.

- He made passing out Bibles a *capital crime*.
- Eventually, Tyndale was captured and burned at the stake.
- Witnesses to his execution said his last words were a prayer, “Lord, open the King of England’s eyes!”
- And God answered his prayer.
- Just three years later, the king changed his mind and not only allowed but funded the translation of the Bible.
- As the saying goes, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”

### **But this raises the question ...**

- What was it about people reading the Bible that terrified the political powers of the day so *much* they were willing to censor, or even ban and *burn* every copy they could find?
- *And* what was it about Scripture that so many people were willing to suffer exile, torture, and even death, just to get a copy into our hands?
- Whatever Scripture is, it certainly is no ordinary book.
- And from the earliest days of the Jesus movement all the way through church history, followers of Jesus have said in unison: Scripture is more than a well-curated collection of stories and poems and historical records. It’s like a map to another world. Like a portal to a whole other reality — what the Celtic Christians called a “thin place.” And if you enter it, it has the potential to change not just your life, but the world.
- And yet, here we are today, many years later, and let’s be honest: Many of us have two or three Bibles lying around our home, but we don’t even read them.
- In recent years, we’ve seen the rise of “the post-Bible Christian”: a modern, Western kind of person who retains a vestige of Christian spirituality, while attempting to sever any serious ties to Scripture.
- We don’t burn Bibles anymore, we just ignore them.

**Seam:** What are we missing? What did they see that we don’t?

### **Jesus was a rabbi:**

- This Practice is designed to help you follow Jesus.

- And Jesus was a rabbi, which is an Aramaic word meaning “teacher.”
- Rabbis were teachers of Scripture.
- Like any 1st-century rabbi, Jesus had most, if not all, of the Hebrew Bible — or what today we call the Old Testament — put to memory.
- His mind and imagination were steeped in Scripture. His identity itself and his vision of life were extrapolated straight out of its writings.
- Read Jesus’ teachings! They are *full* of quotes and allusions and prayers and prophecies and promises right off the pages of Scripture.
- And Jesus’ view of Scripture was incredibly high.
  - He said things like, “Scripture cannot be broken.” in John 10.<sup>1</sup>
  - In Mark 12, he quoted Psalm 110 by saying, “David himself, *speaking by the Holy Spirit*, declared ... .”<sup>2</sup> Jesus is blatantly saying that this ancient text was God speaking through David.
  - Also in Mark 12, he rebuked the religious leaders by saying, “Are you not in error *because you do not know the Scriptures* or the power of God?”<sup>3</sup>
  - In Luke 24, there’s a story of Jesus teaching two disciples on the road to Emmaus that in the Law and Prophets, the Messiah had to die. The disciples reflect, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”<sup>4</sup>

**Seam:** If we’re going to apprentice under Jesus, we need to come to see Scripture through his eyes. To that end ...

**Turn:** Turn in your Bibles to Matthew 5.

- In context, this is from the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount.
- Jesus frames his most famous teaching with a word on Scripture.

### **Matthew 5:17-19**

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”

- “The Law and the Prophets” was a common way of referring to the Bible of Jesus’ day.
- “The Law,” or in Hebrew, “the Torah,” was the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

- And “the Prophets” was a way of referring to the rest of what we call the Old Testament.
- “Do not think I have come to abolish ...” The word “abolish” is καταλῦσαι, and it’s used later by Matthew to mean destroying a building or institution. It was a technical term in Jesus’ day that meant to disobey or dismiss the Bible.
- Apparently, Jesus was saying and doing things that were so radical, some people thought he had come to disobey the Bible — to throw it out as a relic from the past and move on.
- But he says, “I have come to *fulfill* them.” Now, the word “fulfill” is a twist; it’s a surprise to the ear.
- What’s the opposite of disobey? To obey, right? You would expect Jesus to say, “Don’t think I have come to *disobey* the Law or the Prophets; I have come to obey them.”
- But instead, he says, “I’ve come to *fulfill* them.”
- In Greek, it’s the word *plerasia*, which is used all throughout the book of Matthew for a prophecy from the Hebrew Scriptures coming to pass in Jesus.
- Jesus sees the entire story of the Bible as all leading to him.
- Then he says this:

“For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.”

—Matthew 5v18

- Okay, follow me here: The word that is translated “smallest letter” in the NIV translation is referring to the Hebrew word *yod* — the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet.
- It’s literally the size of an apostrophe.
- And the word that is translated “the least stroke of a pen,” is referring to a little serif that is used to distinguish the Hebrew letter *khaf* from *resh*. It’s a tiny little hook, like the difference between a capital O and Q in English.
- Another way to translate this is: “Not one dot of an i, not one cross of a t will drop out of the law ... ”<sup>5</sup>
- Jesus is saying that the Bible, down to its smallest details, will hold true until everything is “accomplished.”

“Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches



these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” —Matthew 5v19

- The word “sets aside” is the same word translated “abolish” in the line before. Again, it means to disobey.
- He’s saying that anybody who disobeys the least — and notice the wordplay here — the *least* of these commands will be called *least*.
- But, whoever “practices” — notice his language — practices “These commands” — referring to the commands of the Bible, and in particular, the ones Jesus is about to teach in the Sermon on the Mount — “will be called great in the kingdom ....”
- Meaning that if you don’t disobey or dismiss the teachings of the Bible, but instead you take them really seriously, in particular, *Jesus’* teachings on the Bible, and you devote your life to practicing them and teaching other people how to practice them, then you will grow into one of the great ones in the Kingdom of God.

**Point:** You could put it this way: For Jesus, there is a reciprocal relationship between the place of Scripture in our lives and the level of our formation into Kingdom people.

### Why we read:

- This is why we read the Bible;
- Not because we have an odd penchant for ancient literature, but because we have come to love and follow *Jesus*, and, at an intuitive level, we know that following Jesus and immersing our minds in the library of Scripture are inseparable.
- But he is the *reason* we trust Scripture, not the other way around.
- I love this from Andrew Wilson, the Reformed Bible teacher from London:
  - “Ultimately ... our trust in the Bible stems from our trust in Jesus Christ ... I don’t trust in Jesus because I trust the Bible; I trust the Bible because I trust in Jesus. I love him, and I’ve decided to follow him, so if he talks and acts as if the Bible is trustworthy, authoritative, good, helpful, and powerful, I will too ... even if some of my questions remain unanswered, or my answers remain unpopular.”<sup>6</sup>

### Three goals:

- As apprentices of Jesus, we organize our whole lives around three basic goals:
  - To be with Jesus.
  - To become like him.

- And to do as he did.
- And Scripture is essential to each goal.
- *To be with Jesus:* As we read, we discover this isn't like reading an ordinary book. The author is with us in the room. Reading this ancient library is a way of opening our hearts to God's presence.
- *To become like him:* As we read, we take his thoughts into our own minds. We begin to think like him, feel like him, see the world like him, and *live* like him.
- *And to do as he did:* As we read Scripture and *put into practice what it says*, we are formed into people who live out the Way of Jesus.
- Do you see it?
- *Reading, mediation, studying, and memorizing* Scripture are all essential aspects of our apprenticeship to Jesus.
- As Dallas Willard once said, we come to Scripture as a part of a "conscious strategy to cooperate with God for the full redemption of our life."<sup>7</sup>

**Sticky line:** *But here's the key!* This will require us to read Scripture very differently from how we read a young adult novel or a school textbook or a news op-ed. We have to learn *how* to read Scripture not just for *information*, but for *formation*.

### **And *that* is the goal of *this* Practice ...**

- To clarify, this is not a hermeneutics course.
  - Hermeneutics is the academic word for the art and science of biblical interpretation. It's where you learn how to read the various genres and literary types of the Bible and notice the design patterns that repeat throughout the canon.
  - And it's very *important*.
  - If you don't *understand* the text, how can it form you in the way Jesus intended?
  - In fact, if you *misunderstand* the text, it can *malform* you.
- That's why there are two basic skills we need to develop as apprentices of Jesus:
- One is biblical interpretation (or hermeneutics); we need to learn how to study the Bible and understand what we're reading.
- The other is spiritual reading. Once we get our heads around the text, we need to learn how to read it not just with our heads, but with our whole persons, not just *informationally*, but

*formationally.*

- These two skills rise or fall together.
- If you only focus on one, you will hit a cap on your spiritual growth.
- Both matter.
- And we'll do a little bit of hermeneutics work in our session on study.
- But this Practice is going to focus more on spiritual reading ...
- Because ultimately our goal is not just to know the Bible, it's to read the Bible in such a way that we meet Jesus himself on the page and are deeply formed to be like him.
- It's to read Scripture as a *spiritual discipline* — or as a way of opening to God.

**Seam:** And the first step is just to begin reading Scripture daily as an apprentice of Jesus.

### **Step one: the daily reading of Scripture**

#### **Ending:**

- And as you read, remember: Your rabbi, the author himself, *is in the room with you*.
- You may want to imagine Jesus looking over your shoulder as you read this week.
- You're not just reading about Jesus.
- You're reading *with* Jesus.
- As Dallas Willard once said, "Come to your chosen passage as to a place where you will have a holy meeting with God."<sup>8</sup>
- As you learn how to slow down and read Scripture prayerfully and intuitively ... Jesus will come up to you and speak with you.
- He will highlight words and phrases from the page. He will plant new images in your mind and imagination, draw up memories from your past, and speak into your present and your future.
- He will love you and lead you.
- This is why reading the Bible as a spiritual discipline is more about *posture* than *technique*.
- Don't get me wrong, technique is important; and we'll talk about different methods that people use to read Scripture — all that matters.



- But what matters even *more* is to come with the right heart; the heart of an apprentice of Jesus.
- “God, here I am; speak to me now ...”
- So this week, every day as you open your Bible: Slow down, breathe, and pray for Jesus to meet you on the page.
- E. Stanley Jones, the Methodist intellectual who spent most of his life as a missionary to India, said this of his daily practice of reading Scripture:
  - “Every day I go to these words and I ask them: ‘Have you seen him whom my soul loves?’ And the words take me by the hand and lead me beyond the words to Him who is the word.”

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## Notes

1. John 10v35 (ESV)
2. Mark 12v36 (Emphasis added)
3. Mark 12v24 (Emphasis added)
4. Luke 24v32
5. Bruner, F.D. (2007). *Matthew: A Commentary*. Volume 1: The Christbook, Matthew 1-12. Eerdmans.
6. Wilson, A. (2014). *Unbreakable: What the Son of God Said About the Word of God*. 10Publishing.
7. Willard, D. (1999). *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God*. InterVarsity Press.
8. Willard, D. (1999). *Hearing God*.