“Standing on the Promises”
Bible-Centered Preaching/Teaching
Based on the belief that the Bible is God’s Word and the primary authority for our beliefs and actions, sermons and Church Education will be based on Scripture.
Psalm 119:97-104, 2 Timothy 3:14-17, 2:1-4
September 14, 2025
Rev. Dr. Anita K. Herbert

Psalm 119:97-104

97 Oh, how I love your law!
It is my meditation all day long.
98 Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies,
for it is always with me.
99 I have more understanding than all my teachers,
for your decrees are my meditation.
100 I understand more than the aged,
for I keep your precepts.
101 I hold back my feet from every evil way,
in order to keep your word.
102 I do not turn away from your ordinances,
for you have taught me.
103 How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!
104 Through your precepts I get understanding;
therefore I hate every false way.

Introduction

The pastoral epistle of 2 Timothy is written from the perspective of the apostle Paul to his young protégé, Timothy. Timothy has grown up in a Christian home, having been taught the faith by his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice. Paul regards Timothy as a son and as one of the leaders who will carry on the mission after Paul is gone. Paul is trying to encourage him to stay on the path, to not let discouragement and fear or any setback cause him to falter.

2 Timothy 3:14-17, 4:1-4

14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it 15 and how from childhood you have known sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 so that the person of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

4** In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: **2** Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.**3** For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. **4** They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. **5** **As for you, be sober in everything, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

The Power of God's Word

We flew to Cleveland a couple of weeks ago to visit Ralph's sister and one of his childhood friends. At the beginning of our trip, as we made our way through security at Charleston International Airport, Ralph's bag was flagged by TSA and pulled aside for a closer look. The agent opened the bag and pulled out a plastic bag. In it was an item covered in duct tape, which probably looked on the x-ray like a package of C4 explosives. Instead, it was Ralph's Bible. (hold up)

Those of you who have been in Bible study with Ralph know that this particular Bible is one of his most cherished possessions that he has had and read for many years. The duct tape is because it is literally falling apart. And don't try to buy him a new one, as others have done, because this Bible is precious. It is filled with notes, but not only that, Ralph has read and studied it so much that he can visualize where many Scriptures are on the page. It is the item that he has said he would grab first if the house were to catch on fire.

The Bible is one of our most cherished possessions. It is our authority and guide for living. Its authenticity is supported by the over 5,000 Greek New Testament manuscripts in existence, more than any other piece of ancient literature. Its authority is grounded not only in its

authenticity, but in our understanding of its pre-eminence. It is God's revelation to us, the written word which testifies to the living Word, the author of our salvation, Jesus Christ. As such, preaching and teaching from God's Word is one of our core values, something that runs through everything that we do.

Like so many things in our country these days, the Bible not only divides the soul and spirit of individuals, it also has been a source of division for God's people. How do we understand it? How do we interpret what it says, especially as it applies to a modern culture? How do we apply it to our lives?

Let's wade into that conversation by seeing what the Bible says about itself. Hebrews 4:12 says, ***12*** *For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.* This tells us that God's word is powerful, not because it is literal dynamite, but because it is enlivened by the *dunamis*, the Holy Spirit. It is also powerful because of the conviction it can bring to the believer, because it penetrates through our falsehoods and excuses. As much as we read the Bible, it has been said, the Bible reads us. But we have to know it, to study it, to love it, as the psalmist does in Psalm 119, for God's Word to penetrate in the way God intends.

The American Bible Society regularly conducts surveys to assess how frequently Americans read their Bibles, and they discovered something "disheartening" in 2022. That is that roughly 26 million people had mostly or completely stopped reading the Bible in the last year. This was a dramatic drop, for from 2011-2021, about 50 percent of Americans said they read the Bible on their own at least three or four times a year. That number had stayed more or less steady during that time, but in 2022, it dropped 11 points. Now only 39 percent say they read the Bible multiple times per year or more. It is the steepest, sharpest decline on record. And it wasn't just the occasional Scripture readers represented in the report. More than 13 million of the most engaged Bible readers—measured by frequency, feelings of connection to God, and impact on day-to-day decisions—said they read God's Word less.[1]

Contrast this to the diligence Moses encouraged the people of God in Deuteronomy 6:
6 *These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts.* ***7*** *Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.* ***8*** *Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.* ***9*** *Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.*

Where do we fall on the spectrum? Do we read our Bibles 3-4 times a year? Do we read a daily devotional? Paul encourages Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:15 to study to show himself as one approved, accurately handling the word of truth. It's hard to understand God's desire and apply his Word to our lives if we don't know what it says.

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[1] *Source: Adam MacInnis, "Report: 26 Million Americans Stopped Reading the Bible Regularly During COVID-19," Christianity Today Online (4-20-22)*

Jesus' teaching ministry flowed out of these sacred writings of the law and the prophets, what we know as the Old Testament. He saw his teaching in continuity with God's Word, saying in Matthew 5:17 at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount: "for I have not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it." But as God's Son, he understood that he had the authority not only to interpret but to expand it, and so several times in that sermon he would say, "You have heard that it was said…" then would say "but *I* say to you…" He was not contradicting the law but intensifying it, taking it to the next level that moved from outward obedience to inward motivation. Even if you don't kill someone, as the law forbids, Jesus said, if you are angry in your heart and wish he was dead, God sees no difference. "Human beings look at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart." Jesus calls his disciples to a higher standard of conduct and faith, not a lesser one.

Jesus' teachings and Paul's letters would have been circulating and were undoubtedly included, in Paul's instruction to Timothy to be faithful to the sacred writings. Because he says that these sacred writings have a sacred purpose: "to instruct you for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ." This is important, for it sets out the primary role of Scripture, and by implication what is not its primary purpose. The primary purpose of the Bible is not to teach science, though people of faith affirm that God orchestrates the creative process. The primary purpose of the Bible is not historic, though it gives us a history of God's people. The primary purpose of the Bible is to bring people to faith in Jesus Christ. This is a definition of infallible that makes sense to me. That God's word is "unfailing" in what it intends to do, which is tell about God's provision for restoring his relationship with his people, which we proclaim he has done through Jesus Christ. John is unabashed in the purpose of his gospel: "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:31).

This understanding frees us from the traps that an insistence on inerrancy sets for us. It means we don't have to resolve conflicts from the different points of view of the human authors or harmonize their different voices, because they are unified in this goal. Yet we do affirm that Scripture is inspired by God. The word is literally, "God-breathed," as God breathed life into Adam's nostrils. And while God did not possess his human authors to the point they became robotic in their writing, he does gift them with insight to the degree that they can confidently assert, "thus saith the Lord." There is no other book that can claim that level of authority or inspiration, so it is one to which we must submit ourselves.

A.J. Jacobs, who describes himself as a secular Jew, conducted a religious experiment and wrote about it in his book, *A Year of Living Biblically*. He lived for a year by the rules and regulations and teachings of the Bible. For example, in accordance with Deuteronomy 22, he engaged the services of a New York *shatnez* tester to ensure that his clothes did not mix wool and linen in them. In accordance with Exodus 23, he removed the names of false gods from his vocabulary, which meant that he could not even use the words "Wednesday" and "Thursday," because they honor the false gods Thor and Woden. He allowed the side of his hair to grow uncut in accordance with Leviticus 19 and wore all white garments (Ecc. 9:8). In his review of the book,

J. Peter Holmes said, "the account is humorous, but from a glance at the publicity photographs, it would seem to suggest that the Bible is hideous."[2]

The Bible has been misused and abused, made fun of, described as fiction, irrelevant, out of date and archaic. Over against that is Paul's word to Timothy and to us that this God-breathed, fully human yet fully divine document is *useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.* Our faith in God's word will always be tested. We often don't understand its true character until after we place our trust in it, seeking to build its principles and promises into our daily lives. We seek to be one approved or tested by God's standards and not the shifting consensus of human wisdom.

I listen to a parenting podcast hosted by Dustin and Melissa Nickerson who are both around 40 years old. I like it because it helps me understand the perspective and challenges of those from a different generation and life experience than my own. On this week's podcast, they were reviewing some of the many parenting trends that had come along in the 19 years they had been parents: swaddling, Baby Einstein, parenting as a Tiger Mom, gentle parenting, and a few others to boot. Their point was this was overwhelming, leaving them not sure which trend to pursue and which not.

We can be like that in the Christian world, too. There are many Christian authors, speakers, podcasters, influencers out there, and Christianity is certainly not immune to its trends. We are always seeking the "new thing" that will help us live a more effective, meaningful, successful life. Over against that we have God's Word, which does not change. This doesn't mean that we don't have to interpret it based on situations that arise in our lives and in our world that were simply not a part of the culture in which the Bible is written. And sometimes we arrive at different conclusions. This is why the fifth value and final one in our series is theological diversity, where we can acknowledge that we don't quite see all the issues the same way. And yet, we try to understand what the Bible does say, allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture. We'll also affirm what must be kept at the center of our faith, which is that salvation comes through Jesus Christ, who is the only author and finisher of our faith.

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus will say to his disciples that he was giving them a new commandment. It wasn't one that wasn't already a part of holy writ, but it was one that he was calling on his disciples to apply to their lives in a radical way. And that was to love one another. This is the love that covers over a multitude of sins and forgives 70 times 7. This is the love that cannot only be applied to our families or those who agree with us, but must be applied even to our enemies, so that if they ask us to go one mile, we will go two instead.

For the Bible assures us of the primacy of God, that God's light and love cannot be overcome by this present darkness and hate. It is a reminder that there is only one on whom we should place

[2] Holmes, J. Peter. "Homiletical Perspective," 2 Timothy 3:14-17, 4:1-5 in "Feasting on the Word: Year C, vol. 4," ed. Bartlett, David and Taylor, Barbara Brown (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Know Press, 2010), p. 183-195.

our ultimate trust and swear our ultimate allegiance, for he is the only one who will never fail us, will never let us go. Karl Barth famously said that in the mornings he would read the newspaper with one hand, while holding the Bible with the other. For the Bible gives us God's worldview and the values by which we live our lives. It shapes and grounds us.

Paul wanted Timothy to know that, to stand firm, to be ready to preach the word in season and out. In other words, in times when people are receptive and when they aren't. For at times we all have itchy ears, we want to hear the word and listen to the voices that only support our point of view, whether it be about politics or theology. But God's Word will not tolerate any other system to be put in place and be the lens through which we read it. The Bible is the great iconoclast, refusing to let us create God in our own image or to allow us to focus only on the things that are self-serving. Instead, God's Word is filled with instructions that encourage justice and love, that bring conviction and encouragement. It points faithfully and unfailingly to the only one who can save us.

A pastor serving in Montreal visited an agitated parishioner in the hospital during the final stages of a terrible disease. Kindly she sat down beside the woman and took her hand and began to read, "The Lord is my light…" (Ps. 27:1), but before she could finish the sentence, the patient did, "…and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?" The young minister began to read one comforting Scripture passage after another, only to have the patient take over the reading of each one--except the patient was not reading. For these verses had been instilled in her from her earliest days, committed to memory for such a time as this.[3] For like the balm of Gilead, God's word brought comfort, stillness, and peace to the woman. It would point her to her ultimate healing, as God was preparing her to be with him forever.

The issues of our world are troubling and call us to think deeply about how we are to respond as people of faith. The Bible is one of the tools God gives us, along with those who have instilled their faith in us and those who surround us in this gathering. But as complex as our world and its concerns are, there is a simple truth that we must keep in mind:

Jesus loves me, this I know,
For the Bible tells me so.

Let us stand on this promise, reflecting love and light into a world that so desperately needs it right now. Amen.

[3] Holmes, J. Peter. "Homiletical Perspective," 2 Timothy 3:14-17, 4:1-5 in "Feasting on the Word: Year C, vol. 4," ed. Bartlett, David and Taylor, Barbara Brown (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Know Press, 2010), p. 185.