

6 September 2015

What Do We Do with This Stuff?
2 Timothy 3:16-17

Some of you may be offended, or at least concerned, about a sermon series called “The Problem, or Problems, with the Bible.” After all, we found our faith on this book; when we start picking at it, doesn’t that make our faith less stable? So I think I need to start with a personal word.

I love the Bible. And when I say that I don’t just mean that I love Psalm 23 and some other comforting bits, I love the whole thing, intensely, to the extent that I have dedicated most of my life to reading it, studying it, and teaching it. Since December 15, 1981, the day my sister died, I have read the Bible every morning. I have read it through in the New American Standard version, the King James, the Revised Standard, the New Revised Standard, the New English, the New International, and the Good News Bible. (Remember that one from the 70s? The one with all the line illustrations of creepy figures without faces?) I’ve read it through now at least 20 times. After I got to seminary and studied Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic, I began reading it in the original languages. I went on to get a PhD in Hebrew Bible, and spent two years teaching Bible at the university and graduate school levels. I taught Hebrew, Old Testament, New Testament, Greek, Biblical Theology, Biblical Backgrounds, and Youth Ministry. (Yeah, not sure where that last one came from.) I became a preacher to continue teaching this book, and shortly after I began my first pastorate, I started a new discipline – committing long sections to memory. I have memorized Psalms 1, 19, 103, and 132 and Matthew 5-7 and the book of Philippians. I have read scriptures from other religions. I have read the Quran twice, the Baghavad Gita at least four times, the Upanishads, the Dhammapada of Buddhism, and the Taoist writings of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu. I have found inspiration in all of them, but in none of them have I encountered anything like the depth and breadth and power of the Holy Bible. So while many may disagree with me on my interpretations of the Bible – and you are always free to do that – but let no one dare say that I am in any way attacking it. I have dedicated my life to opening this book to others. I love the Bible.

But here’s the thing about love. It does not prosper when we blind ourselves to our beloved’s weaknesses. Think about your other love relationships. A healthy marriage requires knowing and accepting your partner’s weaknesses. My wife Rebecca, of course, may be flawless, but I am not, and our 29 years of marriage have only been possible by her willingness to accept those flaws in me that she has not yet been able to fix. And 29 years is nothing. Bob and Grace Wylie here have been married for 71, and I’m sure they will tell the same story. Love means acknowledging and accepting the other’s weaknesses – recognizing that those weaknesses, more often than not, are just the flip side of our loved one’s strengths. So it is with all our relationships: our children, our parents, our friends. And this is true for me of the Bible as well: I love this book, but that does not mean it’s always easy to live with.

But maybe you know what I mean. I mentioned in last week’s sermon – as we read some fairly unorthodox verses from the Song of Solomon – that nearly everyone who actually tries to read the Bible is struck at some point by the sense that it is not at all the sort of book that they were expecting to find. Things show up all the time in the Bible that make you ask yourself,

“Where did *that* come from?” But let me take a moment now to ask you. What are some of the questions that you have had when you’ve dealt with the Bible?

[At this point I took a microphone to the pews, letting people name their questions, while I wrote them in a notebook. Among the questions I received were:

- *Jesus says when someone sins against us, we are to confront them privately. But he also says “Judge not, that you be not judged.” So are we supposed to confront others’ sins or not?*
- *God sometimes seems really violent in the Bible, commanding Israel to wipe out whole nations. What do we do with a God who commands genocide?*
- *Why is God always male?*
- *1 Timothy says women shouldn’t teach, but should keep silent in the church. So, does that mean me? Should I even be asking this question?*
- *There are all sorts of laws in Leviticus. Some of them we ignore, and some of them people say we’re supposed to follow. How do you know which ones still apply?*
- *Jesus said nothing about homosexuality, but he had some fairly strict words against divorce. But people today talk about homosexuality but don’t seem to have any problem with people who have been divorced twice – like me. How do we decide what’s important in the Bible?]*

Let’s look back at our reading for the day, the one from 2 Timothy. *All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.* Now, I believe that is true. I believe that God was at work in the writing, the editing, and the compiling of the books that make up our Bible. I moreover believe that everything that we need to know about seeking God, serving God, and growing close to God can be found in scripture. Here we can learn where to start, where to take our stand, and what pitfalls to avoid on our journey. It’s all in here.

And yet, at the same time, this passage from 2 Timothy is one of the most frustratingly misleading scriptures I know. It makes it *sound* as if the Bible is a simple and practical instruction book, like an owner’s manual or a Do-It-Yourself website on life. Got a relationship problem? Check the index and follow the indicated steps. Struggling with depression? Enter some key words, and voila! There it is! “Five biblical cures for depression that your psychologist doesn’t want you to know!” But that stuff is not in here. This is *not* an instruction manual for life. Oh, sure, the Bible does contain some clear, step-by-step instructions. If you want to know what to do with the blood of a sin offering or how to build a moveable desert shrine to God, the Bible’s got you covered, but if you’re looking for easy rules for dealing with the pain of this life, no. Neither life nor the Bible is that simple.

One more time, it’s like love. Love cannot flourish where one partner refuses to see the flaws, weaknesses, and inconsistencies of the other. Putting on blinders and convincing yourself that the one you love is perfect is not actually love. It’s fantasy. It’s delusion. And it’s a recipe for crushing disappointment. True love comes from working through problems and discovering the strengths that are connected to each weakness. And that’s what we’re going to do this fall

with the Bible. We are going to look honestly at problems with the Bible, at where they came from, why they are problems, and just what we're supposed to do with this stuff.

We are not, repeat *not*, going to try to explain the problems away to show that they aren't problems at all. That's how most people seem to approach problems in the Bible, and there are several books that claim to explain every problem issue. I hate those books. They're just as delusional as pretending there are no problems at all; they just use bigger words. But I do have one book that is useful, a Christmas gift from my Anglican priest friends in New Zealand: *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*. [*Open it to show that it's been hollowed out to hold a concealed flask.*] Those Anglicans. You've got to love them.

Well, we aren't going to answer all those questions or resolve all the problems in this series. What I want us to do instead is to meet the Bible, in all its glory and weirdness, make friends with it, and maybe even fall in love.