

HAVE YOU READ IT FOR YOURSELF?

A SERMON FOR THE SECOND SUNDAY OF
*COMMITTED TO CHRIST: SIX STEPS TO
A GENEROUS LIFE*
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
SEPTEMBER 22, 2013
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2 TIMOTHY 3:15-17

Did you watch *The Bible* on television? Six months or so ago, the History Channel brought into the homes of our nation a ten hour epic miniseries based on the Bible. The project was headed by Rona Downey, best known for her role in the television series *Touched by an Angel*, and her husband, Mark Burnett, who is the producer of the long-running reality series, *Survivor*

They were inspired to tackle the project after watching the Cecil B. DeMille movie, *The Ten Commandments*

The first episode, watched by over 13 million viewers, was the largest cable audience of the 2013 season. The next two installments garnered more than 10 million viewers, and more than 100 million people have seen the videos to date, either in re-run, or watching the DVD's at home.

Now I want to tell you that I didn't like the production. It was too much Cecil B. DeMille. I'd have liked a little more of *Survivor!*

I've long contended that the Bible had the stuff of great television in it, and for once, I was proved right. I still think a mini-series on the missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul has potential, and you talk about a survivor!

Did you watch the mini-series? Or have you read it for yourself? Let me tell you, the book is better than the movie! They had to cut a whole lot of sex and violence out of the book to get it on the air!

Have you read it for yourself? I had a fellow tell me once that he had read the Bible through from cover to cover five times. My spontaneous response was, "Whatever for?"

Reading the Bible, studying the Bible, is not something that should be undertaken just to say that you've done it, like hiking the Appalachian Trail, or swimming the Florida Strait, or completing a tri-athlon.

Reading the Bible, studying the Bible, is not a mental or intellectual exercise. It is, if done correctly, a spiritual discipline, an exercise of the soul, for in reading and studying the Bible, we are encountering the Word of God.

Now there are lots of ways to read and study the Bible. I'm not going to try to tell you which is right for you. I will try to tell you what is wrong for most folks.

First of all, that reading of the Bible through from cover to cover, as though it were a novel, or a biography, or a history, doesn't work for most folks. They get to the "begats", and they get to the Deuteronomic Code, or the Levitical Code, and that's it, they done for!

Billy Graham has advised those who have asked him about reading the Bible to start with the New Testament, and maybe even start with the Gospel of John, rather than Matthew.

John's got some great stories in it, that aren't in the other gospels, and that alone makes it worth reading. Of course, John doesn't tell the story of Christmas, so you'll have to read Luke and Matthew to get that.

Reading the Bible through is a good spiritual discipline. It only takes about three chapters a day, if I recall correctly, to read it through from cover to cover. But reading passages that have special meaning for special occasions has always seemed more meaningful to me than just the cover to cover read. Reading the great stories is the most fun!

Sadly, most of us don't take time to read the Bible. And by most of us, I mean most Christians, and maybe most especially most of us who are ministers of the gospel. I think it was Stan Ott who I heard quote the figure that most ministers only read in a week's time the scriptures they are studying to prepare for the sermons they are going to preach and the lessons they are going to teach. I'm confessing. I'm guilty! For many years, that was my practice. Now because I was preaching from the lectionary for the Christian Year, I was reading and studying a wide variety of texts. And during those years I taught the Bible through from cover to cover a time or two as well as teaching series on things like the Prophets or the Pauline Epistles, or the other New Testament letters. I've even done a little of that, too.

But just to read the Bible for the sake of reading the Bible? I didn't have time to do that. And when I used a daily devotional guide that had scripture lessons to go along with the writings, I confess I read the stories, the articles, but never looked up the texts! I was too busy being a minister of the word and sacrament to read the word.

And then I retired. And I didn't have to write a sermon every week. And I didn't have to prepare a Bible study five or six times a month. And I finally had time to read the Bible.

But did I? No, I did not. I'd read my favorite passages, the Psalms so near and dear to me, the words from Corinthians and Philippians and James and Hebrews that are special to me.

Then I discovered the daily lectionary on line. It is on the PCUSA website, the home page of our denomination. And reading the daily lectionary lessons expanded and enriched my reading of the Bible. I have it set up to come in with my email. It is sent out from the computer in Louisville about two in the morning, so it is my first email of the day unless Stanley Littleton has stayed up late the night before!

I get two morning Psalms, at least one of which is usually a favorite. Then I get an Old Testament reading. This week, it has been the story of Jehosaphat! That's followed by a reading from one of the New Testament lessons, and then a Gospel reading, and this week we started the Sermon on the Mount. And then there are two evening psalms, which I usually save for the last time I check my email in the evening. If I'm in a hurry, I'll just do the morning Psalms. But every time I check my email during the day, I'll pick up another passage.

After forty-five years in the ministry, I'm finally reading the Bible every day, and it took my computer to get me to do it!

Joy Gilbert tells me that she gets the daily lectionary on audio, so that she can listen to it while she does other things, like driving!

I said I was going to tell you about some wrong ways to read the Bible, and I will before I'm through. One wrong way to read the Bible is as a world history book. It isn't. It is a salvation history; the story of God's saving work through Jesus Christ.

Another wrong way to read it is as a scientific text book. It isn't that, either, but a testimony to the mighty acts of God that defy the laws of science.

Perhaps the worst way to read the Bible is to just open the book to any place, and then start reading.

The story goes that a fellow was seeking God's advice, and his pastor told him to open the Bible and seek God's word. So, the fellow opened his Bible with his eyes closed, ran his finger down the page, and opened his eyes to read, Matthew 27:5 "and Judas went out and hanged himself."

Well, the man knew this could not be God's word to him, so he closed his eyes, flipped over a few pages, ran his finger down the page, opened his eyes to find Luke 10:37: "Go thou and do likewise."

However, another fellow following this method met with some success. A businessman, he was heavily in debt, and asked his pastor for a solution, and the pastor told him to go home and open his Bible. He came back to church the next Sunday with a big smile on his face, and told his pastor that everything was going to be all right thanks to his advice. He had opened the Bible, and the first words he read were, "Chapter 11". So on Monday morning, he had filed for bankruptcy!

We Presbyterians are often accused of being biblically illiterate, and we are often put to shame by our friends from other churches who quote scripture, and chapter and verse. But I've come to learn that they may know what the particular verse says, but they don't know what it means, nor what its context is. I learned from one of my seminary professors that a text without its context is a pre-text, which is one of the reasons I have such a hard time writing sermons on the recommended texts for our commitment series.

But if you want to know the context of today's text, you are going to have to read it for yourself?

Are you ready to take that step, to take one or more steps in your Bible reading? Are you ready to read it for yourself?