

**“Grappling With Scripture”**  
***Sermon Series on the Core Values of FPC WS***  
**Dr. Peter B. Barnes**  
**(2Tim. 3:14-17)**  
**October 4, 2015**

**Introduction.**

*Mission Statement. Prayer.*



The summer after my sophomore year in college, one of the pastors in my home church in Atlanta invited me to be his summer intern, and I jumped at the chance to work with this man. He had a passion for Christ, and I wanted to be like him. Over the course of that summer Jim Bankhead became a huge influence in my life.

There are a number of reasons that summer was life-changing for me, and one of them was because of the way Jim taught me how to study the Bible using an inductive method. Over the course of those three months we studied the Sermon on the Mount in the gospel of Matthew in great detail together – word by word, verse by verse, and chapter by chapter. For three months Jim and I dug deep into that passage of Scripture, and I learned just how inspiring as well as challenging the study of Scripture can really be. I remember how the words of Jesus both comforted and confronted me, and some of them were downright confusing.

One day I read Matthew 5:48, where Jesus said to His disciples, “*Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.*” I wondered, “How can a person do that? Does God expect me to be perfect like Him? If that’s the case, then I don’t have a chance at living this Christian life successfully! No one is perfect.” It was one of the first times in my life I grappled with Scripture, and I struggled to understand what exactly the Bible meant.

This morning we’re going to look at the next core value of our church – Grapple with Scripture. As we do this, there are three matters I want you to consider with me briefly: the inspiration of Scripture; the authority of Scripture; and grappling with Scripture.

**I. The Inspiration of Scripture.**

One of the core convictions of the Christian faith is that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. Today the English verb “inspire” and the noun “inspiration” have many meanings. For example, after the choir or the worship team sings a beautiful song, you might turn to the person next to you and say, “That was really inspiring.” But that’s not what the word means when it’s used in a theological sense when applied to Scripture. In theology inspiration is the supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit upon ordinary people in such a way that their writings become trustworthy expressions of God’s Word to us. It isn’t just the words of people written down a long time ago. It’s the Word of God, and it has relevance for today.

How did God inspire the writers of Scripture? How is it that words which were written down by people are also God’s Word? We read in both the Old and New Testaments that on many occasions the writers were commanded by God to write down what they saw. We see examples of this in Exodus 17:14; Isaiah 8:1; Jeremiah 25:13; and Revelation 1:11. In addition, there is a self-authenticating quality to Scripture in that the New Testament quotes passages in the Old Testament as being the words of God or words of the Holy Spirit (Mt. 15:4; Heb. 1:5ff.). And

the apostle Paul even speaks of his own words as Spirit-taught (1Cor. 2:13) and claims that Jesus was speaking through him (2Cor. 13:3).

But perhaps the best text in the Bible that about this matter of the inspiration of Scripture is the one we've read this morning in 2 Timothy 3:14-17. It says, "*But as for you, [Timothy,] continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*"

The crucial word in this passage is the word that is translated "God-breathed." In some versions of the Bible it is translated "inspired." It's the Greek word *theopneustos*. *Theo* means "God", and *pneo* is the verb "to breath." It refers the power of the Holy Spirit to breathe inspiration into the writers of Scripture. What Paul was saying to Timothy is that while human beings were instruments in writing down the words of Scripture, God is the ultimate author. It's His Word. And as a result, it carries the full weight of His divine authority.

I love this idea that Scripture is God-breathed. I have in my hand a party whistle. By itself, the whistle just sits there curled up without any life or noise. It's only as I blow into it that it comes alive and creates motion and sound. This helps us to see how the Holy Spirit breathed into and animated the writers of Scripture. God filled their minds and their hearts just as the air of my lungs filled and animated the party whistle.

Or think about a balloon. Without the air of my lungs, the balloon hangs limp and is lifeless. But when I blow air into it, the balloon fills up and it can even create motion and noise. The Holy Spirit filled up the writers of Scripture with divine wisdom and insight, and God inspired the words they wrote down. Sometimes they were aware of this, and sometimes they weren't.

So God inspired the writers of Scripture. He breathed divine inspiration into them. And what we have in the Bible isn't just the words of people. It's the Word of God. And because it is God's Word, the Bible is authoritative.

## **II. The Authority of Scripture.**

There is a crisis going on today that is more crippling than a California earthquake, more devastating than the destruction of a hurricane in the Atlantic, and as far-reaching as the crisis of world hunger. The crisis I'm talking about is the crisis of authority. The late Carl Henry once wrote, "No fact of contemporary western life is more evident than its growing distrust of final truth and its implacable questioning of any sure word."

"Everything is relative; there are no absolutes" has become the slogan of our day. And when people are asked penetrating questions about truth and the deeper meaning of life, a common response is, "Who can know these things for certain?" Basically, the conflict involves a clash over what and whose word is authoritative.

At First Presbyterian Church one of our core values is that we believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. Although in many respects it's a book like many others, a collection of ancient writings that includes a variety of genres and styles, it is nevertheless much more. It's the Word of God. We believe that the Lord enabled the writers, compilers, editors, and even collectors of Scripture to use their own different personalities, styles, time and place in history, and even their intentions to nonetheless communicate His Word to a lost and broken world. Through this book God speaks, and in it He gives us an explanation about truth and reality that transcends anything that can be envisioned by the human mind alone. And just as Jesus, the

Word made flesh, was fully human and fully divine, so the Bible has human and divine qualities to it.

There's a great passage in the New Testament that speaks about the authority of Scripture, and it's found in Hebrews 4:13,14. There we read, "*For the word of God is living 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. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.*"

It's a mistake to think the Bible is just an old book that is out-of-date and no longer relevant to modern life. The Bible is alive. It isn't simply the record of great historical events of the past. It's a message for you and me today, and we would do well to apply it to our lives.

I have in my hand a plumb line. It is a chord that has a weight at the end of it, and it's used in the world of building and construction. The purpose of a plumb line is to make sure that whatever you build is vertically straight and properly aligned. If a building isn't plumb, if it isn't straight, then the building is going to have a lot of problems down the road.

I would suggest to you that the Bible is like a plumb line. We should measure our lives against the truth of what Scripture says in order to see how they measure up. And where we are out of line with the truth of the Bible, we need to make a correction and get things right. Because if we don't, we'll only end up having problems down the road. We don't judge and measure Scripture. Scripture judges and measures us.

### **III. Grappling With Scripture.**

There wasn't a single word in the entire 20/20 Vision strategic plan that received more attention and was more debated than the word that appears in this core value – "grapple." Some people on the planning team and on Session said they were uncomfortable using this word to describe how we approach or deal with Scripture, and it might diminish our high view of Scripture. Some even said it made them think of a guy wearing a singlet engaged in a wrestling match! Other words were suggested in its place, words like "study", and "learn" and "obey." But the more we discussed these alternative words, the more we felt they didn't get at the heart of what we were trying to say. And "grapple" continued to make its way back into the language of the core values.

The reason is this. While study, learning, and even obedience are clearly important values we should all embrace when it comes to our view of Scripture and our approach to reading the Bible, one of the characteristics that is unique and distinctive about First Pres is the way we prize and celebrate the invitation of God to engage the life of the mind and to struggle and wrestle with God and the truth of His Word. We're not afraid to ask the hard questions and deal with the controversial subjects.

The Bible is one of the most **comforting** books a person can ever read, and there are many passages which provide solace and encouragement in times of trouble. "*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.*" "*In this world you will have tribulation. But be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.*" And "*I will never leave you nor forsake you. No one can snatch you out of my hand.*"

However, the Bible can also be a **challenging** book to read, and some of the things it says are very provocative. "*Turn the other cheek. Go the extra mile.*" "*How many times should I forgive someone? Not just seven times, but seventy times seven!*" "*The person who wants to follow Jesus must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow Him. If you want to save your life*

*you're going to have to lose it.*" These aren't words of comfort. They're words of challenge. And I struggle to live out these teachings in Scripture as a follower of Christ. Maybe you do too. Mark Twain once said, "Most people are bothered by those passages of Scripture they do not understand, but the passages that bother me are the ones that I do!" He recognized that many times the Word of God can be challenging.

Then there are some passages in the Bible which are downright **confusing**, like those that have to do with the wrath of God, the problem of evil, and the Second Coming of Christ. In addition, a careful study of Scripture reveals that at first blush there are some apparent contradictions, and occasionally you find a discrepancy in the events that are recorded or in the numbers reported. This can rock the faith of some people who try to apply 20<sup>th</sup> century standards for accuracy and reporting to a 1<sup>st</sup> century document. The Bible isn't always an easy book to read. It can be confusing, so we have to grapple with it.

The *message* of the Bible is simple and clear enough for a child to understand, yet the *meat* of Scripture requires careful attention and study to understand it properly. And some matters in the Bible are so complex and profound that the brightest scholars in the world are perennially engaged in an effort to sort them out. Committed believers wrestle with Scripture and struggle to live in the light of its teaching.

I began by telling you the story about my grappling with the passage where Jesus said, "*Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.*" When I asked him about it, Jim Bankhead showed me that the meaning of the Greek word *teleios* which is translated "perfect" can also be translated to mean other things like "mature", "complete", "full grown", and "what a thing is designed for."

If I'm trying to repair something and I need a particular tool to fix it, when I reach for the right tool and use it, I might say, "Oh, this is perfect!" The tool is doing just what it was made for. It's just what I needed. Or, if I come to the end of a special celebration like the wedding of a child, and it feels like the big event was wonderful and complete, I might settle into my easy chair afterward and say, "That was perfect. It doesn't get any better than this." What Jesus was saying in this passage is that the people who want to follow Him should be perfect in the sense that they are mature, complete, and doing just what they were made for. When Jim helped me grapple with Scripture, I came away with a whole new depth of understanding. It was so cool!

Did you know that most Presbyterian church members can't name 3 of the 10 commandments. A majority of members cannot name 2 of the 4 gospels. Most don't know who spoke the Sermon on the Mount, and more think it came from Billy Graham than from Jesus. And 86% of Presbyterians never read the Bible during the week except in worship. Friends, we all need to grapple with Scripture more.

## **Conclusion.**

In his book *Simply Christian*, N.T. Wright has written, "It's a big book, full of big stories with big characters. They have big ideas...and make big mistakes. It's about God and greed and grace; about life, lust, and laughter. It's about birth, beginnings, and betrayal; about siblings, squabbles, and sex; about power and prayer and prison and passion.

"And that's only [the book of] Genesis.

"The Bible...is a huge, sprawling book.... Picking it up, you need to remind yourself that you hold in your hands not only the most famous book in the world, but one which has extraordinary power to change lives, to change communities, to change the world. It's done it before. It can do it again."<sup>1</sup>

*“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”* May God give us faith and courage as you and I grapple with Scripture and seek to live in the light of the inspiration and authority of the Bible. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian*, p. 173.