

## **READING THE BIBLE FOR ALL IT'S WORTH**

### **Introduction No. 2**

**June 25, 2001**

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Now, we are speaking through these summer Sunday evenings of the proper way to read and to preach the Word of God. And we said last time that over against those approaches that emphasize some unifying theme that controls interpretation and preaching – such as the redemptive-historical scheme or the law-gospel scheme – it is more faithful to the Bible's own way of teaching its doctrines to recognize a biblical dialectic. There is in the Bible everywhere and in regard to all its teaching a setting side by side of truths that are not easy to reconcile with one another, that must be held in tension with one another, truths that lie on a continuum of truth but lie at opposite ends. So, for example, divine sovereignty and human responsibility, justification of sinners by Christ's imputed righteousness and our being judged according to our works in the last day, the security of the elect in Christ and warnings everywhere about the genuine danger of falling away, and on and on like that. We noted how often the Bible speaks in a way that surprises us because it is not easy to reconcile that statement with another made elsewhere.

Take something as famous as the Sermon on the Mount. Read it over again yourself tonight. And then ask yourself if, knowing what you know about the gospel, about God's grace, about the gift of Christ's righteousness, you would ever have preached such a sermon yourself. That sermon is all about the law. It is about what we must be and do and it is searching in its demands. Luther said the Sermon on the Mount was "Mosissimus Moses", that is, Moses to the highest degree. A modern scholar said that the Sermon on the Mount was Moses quadrupled! And in that sermon, amidst all that law, we are warned that if we don't forgive others we won't be forgiven, and that those who thought themselves the followers of Christ through their lives and even served him notably – "Lord, Lord, did we not prophecy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles" – will not be acquitted in the day of judgment because they did not do the will of the Father in heaven. Where is imputed righteousness in that sermon? Where is grace covering all our sins in that sermon? It is law from beginning to end. And the Epistle of James is like it in that, so much like it that Luther wondered if James really belonged in the New Testament.

Now, don't mistake me. I believe absolutely in sovereign grace and in the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ and in justification by faith alone. But I do not want my conviction of those things to deafen me to what the Bible says so plainly and clearly and emphatically to me about my duties and about the way in which my life will be judged and about the absolute necessity of my obeying the Lord through the days of my life. The Bible spends huge tracts of its teaching on these latter subjects as well. Teaches them emphatically as it does the former doctrines. Was there ever a man who was a more committed Calvinist than the Apostle Paul, if I may so say? Was there ever a man who believed more firmly in sovereign grace and unconditional election and the perseverance of the saints than the great Apostle to the Gentiles. Was there ever a greater champion of justification by faith alone than Paul? But hear him say what we are loathe to say. "I beat my body and make it my slave, lest having preached to others, I myself be disqualified for the prize."

One of you asked me some questions after last Lord's Day evening's introduction to this subject, the biblical dialectic. He asked if the Roman Catholic-Protestant split on justification was an example

of this tendency to overemphasize one pole at the expense of another. And I would say on the Roman Catholic side, it is absolutely that. Faithful Protestant theology, especially Calvinist theology, never hesitated to proclaim the necessity of good works, even as it proclaimed justification by faith alone. Roman Catholics often criticize Protestant views of justification for their incoherence because we say faith alone and also say that faith must work. But it is the Roman Catholics who desert the Bible because they are unwilling to say faith alone, which the Bible so emphatically and so polemically teaches. The Roman Catholics have a justification that is part faith and part works – the worst possible situation because it renders both poles mush. Is that precisely our impression of so many Roman Catholics? They believe in a salvation by works, but they don't work very hard at it – the Christ part merely softens, weakens the works, it does not brace it with a true grace counterpoise. No we want faith alone *and* we want the absolute necessity of good works. That is what the Bible teaches and each emphasis gets its day in the Bible's teaching and that is why we often find ourselves struggling to maintain both emphases at the same time. They seem to want to fly apart. *And, and this is my point, it must always be this way. You will never, you can never relax this tension. When the tension goes away it will be because you have lost touch with one of the poles!* The same person asked me how the dialectic is different from the idea of Hegel, the 19<sup>th</sup> century German idealist philosopher. You remember Hegel from school days. He saw ideas as always in transit according to a fixed process. A thesis produced an antithesis, they then in their conflict, gave birth to a synthesis, and that synthesis then became the new thesis and so on – an unending development and, of course, in that scheme, truth and knowledge become relative because they are moving all the time. But, in the Bible, the thesis and the antithesis never produce a synthesis, they are eternal truths that abide forever and the tension between them can never be overcome in some resolution. There is perfect resolution in God's mind, of course, but not in our finite minds. We must hold truths together, that is all we can do, we cannot see the perfect harmony of truth, we must simply believe it to exist as God tells us that it does.

Take another example, the Bible's teaching about assurance: how we can know that we are saved. Sometimes the emphasis falls on our believing what we have been told, our counting on Christ and what he has done. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved." "Faith is the victory that overcomes the world." But, in other places, we are shown people who think they believe but are not saved because their lives are not being lived in obedience to God. We are told that the true Christian doesn't sin, that he obeys the commandments of God, that he has that holiness without which no one can see God. In other instances we are told to find our assurance in the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. "The Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God." This becomes one of the most complicated aspects of the Bible's teaching. Each argument for assurance raises questions of its own. How holy must we be? Paul said he was still a bond-slave to sin thirty years after his conversion. How clear must the witness of the Spirit be? Many Christians struggle long under what seems to them a silent heaven. Just how much faith must we have? The longer we think about it the more unbelief we find in our lives each day! Ask yourself how firmly you believe in the promises of God and how obvious it is in your life that you believe them. "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you." "Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart." "We must all stand before the judgment seat of Christ to give an account of the deeds done in the body whether good or evil." And a thousand promises like that. All of this creates terrible tension. It is supposed to. We are safest when we feel as though we are being stretched from all sides, when we are looking for faith, fruit and the Spirit's witness all the time, as if each were the most important evidence of our salvation.

And we are always finding that tension unbearable and resolving it by forgetting about one thing or another the Bible teaches us. Living in tension is difficult, it can be painful; no wonder we seek to escape it.

Now this dialectic in biblical revelation – this juxtaposition or setting side by side truths that are not easily reconciled in our minds or in our lives – has terribly important implications for preaching and for the reading of the Bible. If the Word of God, the whole counsel of God is to be preached rightly and with authority, preaching must pay respects to this dialectic. But tremendous forces conspire to prevent this.

Listen again to Alexander Whyte.

“In Hooker’s and Traver’s day, Thomas Fuller tells us, the Temple pulpit preached pure Canterbury in the morning and pure Geneva in the afternoon. And you will get the highest Calvinism off the last card in one pulpit, and the strictest and most urgent morality off the same card in another; but never, if the Devil can help it, never both in one and the same pulpit; never both in one and the same sermon; and never both in one and the same minister. You have all heard of the difficulty the voyager had in steering between Scylla and Charybdis in the Latin adage. Well, the true preacher’s difficulty is just like that. Indeed, it is beyond the wit of man, and it takes all the wit of God, aright to unite the doctrine of our utter inability with the companion doctrine of our strict responsibility; free grace with a full reward; the cross of Christ once for all, with the saint’s continual crucifixion; the Saviour’s blood with the sinner’s; and atonement with attainment; in short, salvation without works with no salvation without works. Deft steersman as the devil is, he never yet took his ship clear through those Charybdic passages.”<sup>i</sup>

It has always been a temptation for ministers, of course, to preach only part of the truth: that part they most prefer themselves or that part they know their congregation will most approve. Interpretive schemes such as the redemptive-historical or law-gospel are, in my judgment, finally simply a failure adequately to resist this age-old temptation. But there are particular forces abroad in our day that call for special recognition and attention.

1. There is, in the first place, the short pastorate and the serial ministry, a relatively new phenomenon in the evangelical pulpit with vast and sinister consequences that, I fear, are largely unrecognized.<sup>ii</sup> What this means in fact is that congregations tend to have the same parts of the Bible preached to them over and over again, whether because a man feels that these are the portions of Scripture a ministry should begin with, or because these are the sermons he preached before and, being before a new congregation, he is free to preach them again. The parts of the Bible that might eventually have been taken up in a lengthy ministry are never taken up. A friend of mine, Carl Robbins, now a PCA pastor in Greenville, SC, as part of his D.Min study at Westminster Seminary in California, surveyed some 200 men, each of whom was the pulpit minister in a PCA congregation. What the survey revealed was that the PCA has a shrinking canon, if attention in the pulpit is any measure of the authority of a book or a section of the Bible. For example, 100% of respondents had preached within the last three years from the Gospel of John and from Paul. Only 11% had preached in the same period from the historical books of the OT and only 16% from the Minor Prophets. Less than a third had preached from the Major Prophets in that same three year

period, slightly more than a quarter had preached from the Old Testament poets, less than a third had preached from Acts, but 96% had preached from the Synoptics.

No doubt much of this disproportionate emphasis on certain parts of the Bible is due to the fact that these ministers are not long in any pulpit. When they arrive at a new charge, where better to begin than in the Gospel of John or the Letter to the Ephesians; certainly not Hosea or the Song of Songs! Some of it is due as well to the disappearance of the evening service in our churches. People are hearing much less preaching than they used to.

2. In the second place, the dialectic of biblical truth does not make its way forcefully into many contemporary pulpits because expository preaching, by which I mean the consecutive exposition of the Scripture, is increasingly rare. Almost half of the ministers surveyed by Mr. Robbins said that on the Lord's Day morning they preached primarily on "topics" (the family, Christian finance, etc.). Only a fifth of the respondents preached consecutively through books of the Bible. It is very interesting to me that though most of the respondents indicated that they preached primarily topical sermons, 87% characterized themselves as "expository preachers" and only 6% as "topical preachers." Perhaps this betrays a misunderstanding of the term or perhaps it indicates that a conviction remains that the exposition of the Scripture should be the basis of Christian preaching even if, in fact, it no longer is in many cases. More interesting still was the fact that when asked "What factors influence your choice of preaching texts?" 30% chose "Issues that you perceive need to be addressed in the congregation" and 59% chose "The leading of the Holy Spirit."

This is the recipe for disaster so far as the biblical dialectic is concerned. It renders preaching still more vulnerable to the temptation to pick and choose among the favored subjects and themes of God's Word and to ignore or minimize large stretches of biblical revelation that are difficult or unpopular.

It must be said, however, that a return to expository preaching is perhaps unlikely at this time for the simple reason that it places so much greater demands upon the minister. It is much easier for a preacher to choose a subject he feels ready to preach than to have his topics chosen for him by the next paragraph of a book of the Bible that he is making his way through week by week. This preaching requires much more concentrated study of the Word of God, a more serious commitment to exegesis, and yet still requires all of the thought, all of the collateral reading, all of the meditation, that must be poured into any sermon that it might be a fit vehicle for the voice of God.

But do you see the advantages. In this kind of preaching God chooses the subjects of his pulpit, not first the minister; what he has put in, the minister cannot leave out; what he chooses to emphasize, his minister emphasizes in turn. It is this kind of preaching and this only that will form a biblical mind in a congregation, a capacity for thinking as God thinks about everything. And what a blessing it is to the minister himself. I cannot convey to you the blessing it has been to learn the Bible the way I have been forced to learn it in order to preach it book by book, paragraph by paragraph. Klaas Schilder once said of Dr. Greijdanus that he had "crept through the New Testament." Well, it is every minister's task to have crept through the entirety of Holy Scripture and it should be the privilege of every congregation to have the blessing of that close study of the whole of the Word of God, the influence of it bearing down upon them and lifting them up week by week.

3. Third, in every culture, at any time, for whatever personality there are biblical doctrines that are more difficult to preach. For fear of offense or for fear of pain the minister hesitates to preach what the Bible teaches. Those doctrines that are in this way ignored or minimized are invariably the other pole of some continuum of biblical truth.

C.S. Lewis described this temptation brilliantly in advice Screwtape offers Wormwood.

“The use of fashions in thought is to distract the attention of men from their real dangers. We direct the fashionable outcry of each generation against those vices of which it is least in danger and fix its approval on the virtue nearest to that vice which we are trying to make endemic. The game is to have them all running about with fire extinguishers whenever there is a flood, and all crowding to that side of the boat which is already nearly gunwale under. Thus we make it fashionable to expose the dangers of enthusiasm at the very moment when they are all really becoming worldly and lukewarm; a century later, when we are really making them all Byronic and drunk with emotion, the fashionable outcry is directed against the dangers of the mere “understanding.” Cruel ages are put on their guard against sentimentality, feckless and idle ones against respectability, lecherous ones against Puritanism; and whenever all men are really hastening to be slaves or tyrants we make liberalism the prime bogey.”<sup>iii</sup>

Everyone who has pastored a church and preached regularly to a congregation knows the strength of the temptation to mitigate or simply to ignore certain teachings of the Bible. When divorces were few and far between the evangelical pulpit did not hesitate to preach the indefectibility of the marriage vows and warn of the divine displeasure that befell those who were unfaithful to the sacred obligations of marriage. Now that every church has within her membership people who have been divorced or folk who are embittered in their marriages ministers hesitate to speak so strongly. And not from cowardice always. Sometimes it is out of a tenderness of feeling for those who have been damaged by the infidelity of a spouse or who deeply regret their own infidelity that ruined a marriage they now wish with all their hearts might have been preserved. No Christian minister worthy of the name does not know how difficult it is to preach the accountability of parents for the spiritual rebellion of their children when he has before him in his congregation parents whose hearts are broken by the unbelief of their sons and daughters. And on and on it goes: to preach the Bible’s celebration of beauty to a congregation of plain girls, to preach duty and obedience and reward to folk who have made a mess of life and feel defeated by every text of Scripture that summons them to live worthy of the grace they have received; to preach fatherhood when single mothers are present; feminine domesticity to a congregation of working women; or the supremacy of the church in the economy of God to a congregation of home-schoolers who have embraced this *family uber alles* thinking now common in certain circles of the conservative church.

The result very often is that unless the consecutive exposition of the text of Holy Scripture is his method, a preacher will almost invariably prefer certain parts of the Bible to others, certain doctrines to others, certain emphases to others. He may himself be unaware of this, he may deny it, but a simple survey of his preaching would prove the point easily enough. The congregation, accordingly, is not being fed the Word of God in its true content, form, and fashion. The dialectic is missing and the truth of any pole is inevitably misshapen without the pressure of the other pole.

But the peculiar temptations of a particular time and culture are only part of the problem. The fact of the matter is that the Bible is always speaking in a way that we would not and saying things, if the truth be told, we wish it had not said. We are quick to tell the afflicted that suffering is not always a punishment for sin, that it has many other purposes, and to assure them of the tender mercies of the Lord. But how often do we pay attention to the Lord Jesus in John 5:14, who later in the same day on which he healed the paralyzed man at the Pool of Bethesda, found him at the temple and curtly said, "See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you." What Protestant Christian has not been rocked back on his heels by the Lord's statement, "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out -- those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned," a statement made all the worse by the fact that there is no immediate qualification to assure us that he is by no means setting *sola fide* aside. As I asked you last week, has it bothered you, as it has bothered me, that not one of the judgment day scenes painted in Holy Scripture, not one, describes that scene as it is supposed to! Not once do we have the Lord saying, what we assume he would say, namely, "those who believed in me come to my right hand and those who did not come to my left." Rather, *in every case*, it is a picture of a life being examined according to its deeds.

But we must see this, if you are to read and I am to preach the Word of God aright. No one understands *sola fide* correctly, no one rightly feels its force in his heart, who does not at the same time know very well the judgment that is according to works. It is a denatured and weakened *sola fide* that is preached without the preaching of the judgment of works. But, this is also true: to set those two poles in proper tension in a believing mind and heart, each doctrine must have its day in our reading and preaching just as each has its day in biblical revelation. That is faithful preaching of judgment of works must preach that subject, not *sola fide*, and faithful preaching of *sola fide* must preach it and not another doctrine. Too often certain doctrines are muted precisely because preachers insist on doing what the Bible does not: viz. provide all of the qualifications and mitigations that the Scripture supplies elsewhere rather than let the text speak plainly with all its power. I remember growing up in an anti-communist age and hearing sermons on the "community of goods" in *Acts* 2 and 4. And the gist of those sermons, as I recall, was that, of course, we didn't have to do the same thing. We didn't have to practice the community of goods. Perhaps there is a reason, after all, why Protestants do not characteristically produce Mother Therasas! Protestant preachers characteristically preach certain doctrines this way and not others. They qualify certain doctrines but not others. You do not have the doctrine of judgment according to works preached with the same stark power with which it is spoken in Holy Scripture but you do get justification by faith preached that way. And the result is something considerably less than the whole counsel of God taking its place in the minds of a congregation. It is also something considerably less than the glory of each of those doctrines. *Sola Fide* suffers from a want of judgment by works and *vice versa*.

An arch will not stand with only the pressure from the stones on the right side! And however accurately the one pole may be taught, without the pressure of the other pole, even that first doctrine is misshapen. No one understands sovereignty who does not feel the full force of human liberty and no woman has embraced the biblical ethics of physical appearance who does not at one and the

same time fear vanity and love beauty. The dialectic purifies understanding and renders truth both powerful and beautiful, as God intended it to be.

Believe me, we can all be taught to read and hear the Bible this way, to appreciate fully the full force of one truth while understanding that it remains in dialectical tension with another truth at the other end of a continuum. Indeed, Christians who read, hear, and have the Bible preached to them this way are the congregations, I firmly believe, who have the immense privilege of gaining a living sense of the power and the glory of the truth of God because it is taught to them in all of its brilliant and startling clarity and is not rendered mush by the futile effort of a preacher to take the tension out of the dialectical reality.

Our task, therefore, as readers and preachers of the Bible, is not to choose a theme and subject all biblical texts to that theme, even such an exalted and obviously central theme as that of Jesus Christ and his salvation. Our task is to listen carefully to what the Bible says in each and every particular text. Our task is to listen to *that* message and heed *it*.

Now, the redemptive-historical men will at this point make a very effective rhetorical point. A rhetorical point is a point made precisely for its persuasive effect. It may not be a great argument, but it makes a point powerfully. They will say, that if a sermon could have been preached by a Mormon or a Unitarian or an Arian then clearly it has not been preached correctly. Perhaps some would say that if the sermon could be preached by an Arminian it has been preached properly. Surely, there is truth in that and as a rhetorical point it has validity. But rhetorical points often mask unrecognized problems and dangers.

For example, a commonly heard rhetorical point in American jurisprudence and politics is that it is better for ten guilty men to go free than for one innocent man to be condemned. And we all feel the force of that rhetorical point. However, the fact is that if we construct our system of jurisprudence on that principle and the result is that ten guilty men regularly go free for fear of an innocent man being condemned, it will not be long before the society and its system of jurisprudence is so demoralized and so discredited that injustice not justice will be the consequence.

And so with this rhetorical point. Surely no one should think any Christian minister a Mormon or a Unitarian or an Arian. No Christian worship service by itself should allow anyone to think such a thing. And so Christian preachers' sermons should allow anyone to think him anything else but a Christian minister. But, we must be very careful that we do not apply that rhetorical point in such a way that it would have discredited the Epistle of James or the Sermon on the Mount, or that a Christian preacher cannot preach a sermon warning his people of the coming judgment of their lives and their works without weakening, even undermining the whole point, by bringing in – as the Bible does not at that point – the consolations of imputed righteousness and justification by faith. To preach James with James' own emphasis is not legalism or moralism, it is to preach the Word of God. Sometimes Christian folk need to receive the law of God right between their eyes, or so the Bible clearly teaches. Sometimes Christ encounters us in the Word as our King or Master or Judge. He does not encounter us only as our Redeemer.

The fact of the matter is, my brethren, it is as clear to me as can be that the redemptive-historical men and the law-grace men, had they been standing over Matthew's shoulder or James' shoulder, or

the shoulder of many other a biblical writer, would have suggested that they put things differently than they did. We want, rather, to let *God decide* what we need to hear, how we need to hear it, and with what emphasis. And if that means that we must hold together convictions that are not easily held together, if it means we must work both in thought and in life to be faithful to truths that must be held together with might and main, well, then, so be it. It is the nature of reality that it should be so and so the nature of true faith in Christ and God.

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<sup>i.</sup>.. Bunyan Characters, vol. 3, Edinburgh, 1902, p. 145.

<sup>ii.</sup>.. D. Wells, No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology, Grand Rapids, 1993, pp. 228-238.

<sup>iii.</sup>.. The Screwtape Letters, No. XXV.