

Weaponizing the Gospel

Mark 12:18-27, Romans 2:17-29

The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights

February 10, 2010

Pastor Dave Carver

To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit

https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2019/02/scene1_2019-02-10_11.28.49_t001_in1-1.mp3



I don't know if anyone else remembers this or not, but about five years ago CNN and other news outlets covered the story of a bus driver in Dayton, OH, who was shot twice in the chest at close range. As it happened, Rickey Waggoner survived because he was carrying a Bible in his breast pocket, and the Bible absorbed the bullets.

That reminds me of the gentleman who was strolling down a Manhattan street and noticed a bullet laying on the ground. He picked it up, put it in his pocket, and continued on his way. A block or two later, he passed by a home that seemed to be the scene of a horrific argument – there was yelling and screaming and as he stopped to take it in, he felt a burning sensation in his chest and lost consciousness. A few moments later he awoke, and realized that he was essentially unharmed. He pieced together what had happened: in the midst of the fracas inside, someone had thrown a Bible with such force that it shattered the living room window and came right for him. His body suffered the full impact. Fingering his chest, he found the bullet he'd picked up earlier and discovered that it was now grossly misshapen. "Wow," he said to himself. "If it hadn't have been for this bullet, the Word of God might have entered my heart..."

I'd like to invite you to think for a few moments this morning on the Bible, the Word of God, the Good Book...

what it's for, and how we use it and are shaped by it. We'll be guided by our old friend, Mark, as well as Paul's words to his friends in Rome.



¹For several weeks we've been looking at some of the incidents that took place in the last week of Jesus' life. On the day we call Palm Sunday, he rode into town and was greeted by the crowds. On Monday, there was a confrontation with the chief priests and the scribes as he cleansed the Temple, and on Tuesday we've overheard those same folks challenge Jesus on the nature of his authority. Last week we considered the conflict he had, also on Tuesday, with the Pharisees and Herodians as to the payment of the poll tax. Today we learn of yet another group who sent someone forward to challenge Jesus: the Sadducees.

Well, who are these people? The author of Mark tells us that they are a group who does not believe in the resurrection. And you might think that's the source of their name: they have no hope for eternal life, and that is why they are so sad, you see... While that may be true, we also know that this was a group of very conservative men within the Jewish culture. In fact, unlike the Pharisees and the Essenes, the Sadducees did not accept the writings of the prophets like Isaiah or Jeremiah, or literature like the Psalms or Proverbs, to be the word of God. As far as the Sadducees were concerned, the only Bible was the five books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

And even though they didn't get along with either the Pharisees, the Herodians, or the Essenes, the Sadducees were similarly committed to stopping Jesus. So when the

¹ *The Pharisees and Sadducees Come to Tempt Jesus*, James Tissot (between 1886-1894).

other groups fail in their attempts to silence the new teacher, these men give it a try. They, too, come in an attempt to discredit Jesus, and they attack him using theology and Biblical interpretation as a cover.

Jesus calls them on it even faster than he challenged the other parties. Twice in the span of four short verses, he says, “You are wrong.” In fact, he concludes by saying, “you are badly mistaken.” The reason that they are wrong, according to the Savior, is that they know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.

The accusation that they didn’t know scripture must have stuck in their craw a little bit. Like Jesus, the Sadducees were critical of the Pharisees and their willingness to contort Scripture.

The Pharisees had gotten to the point where they had taken the Bible and boiled it down to a rule book. Then they looked at those rules and added layers of meaning and interpretation so as to make sure that they could be the ones to announce exactly who was pleasing to God and who wasn’t.



If you’re a football fan, you know that the NFL has done this in some very frustrating ways. When I grew up, if you threw me a pass, I either caught it or I didn’t. Now, according to NFL rule 8, section 1, article 3,

“A forward pass is complete (by the offense) or intercepted (by the defense) in the field of play, at the sideline, or in the end zone if a player, who is inbounds:

1. secures control of the ball in his hands or arms prior to the ball touching the ground; and

2. touches the ground inbounds with both feet or with any part of his body other than his hands; and
3. after (a) and (b) have been fulfilled, performs any act common to the game (e.g., tuck the ball away, extend it forward, take an additional step, turn upfield, or avoid or ward off an opponent), or he maintains control of the ball long enough to do so.”

BUT

“If a player, who satisfied (a) and (b), but has not satisfied (c), contacts the ground and loses control of the ball, it is an incomplete pass if the ball hits the ground before he regains control, or if he regains control out of bounds”

And *that's* why the games are four hours long...



The Pharisees did the same thing to the Scripture. Do you remember the fourth commandment? “Remember the Sabbath, and keep it holy...” Well, the Pharisees added 39 laws to the fourth commandment so as to ensure that one could, in fact, keep the Sabbath perfectly and, just as important, know who was NOT keeping Sabbath.

Now, while the Sadducees and Jesus both rejected this kind of scriptural tomfoolery by the Pharisees, they did so for different reasons.

The Sadducees said, “God has given us a word, and that word is in the Law of Moses. As long as we know that, keep that, and use only the specific written and sometimes even archaic language of those five books, we are in good shape. We can master that word and know exactly what to do in any situation.”

Jesus said, “Listen, you cannot divorce the word of God from the power and movement of God. Scripture is a living,

breathing attempt to convey the meaning that is at the heart of God, and is never to be used as a personal proof text to build up what you like and tear down what annoys you. What was intended to be a vehicle to give humans a glimpse into the beauty of the Divine intent ought never to be used as an implement of death or disfigurement.

The recent film *Boy Erased* tells the story of a young man who is sent to Conversion Therapy after having been outed as gay to his fundamentalist parents. There is one particularly horrific scene where one young man is surrounded by his peers who are then instructed to literally beat the sin out of him with their bibles.

The Apostle Paul, writing to his friends in Rome, said that those who claim to be somehow better than others because of some external attribute, or practice, or custom, and hide behind scripture while doing it are in fact guiltier than those that they attack.

In some ways, both the Pharisees and the Sadducees were guilty of what might be called “bibliolatry” – taking the words in the Bible more seriously than we take the One who gave us the Bible in the first place. Bibliolatry is what happens when we worry more about making sure that the person sitting across the table from me has the exact same understanding of the Bible as I do than about whether I am living into the heart and meaning of the One to whom the Bible points.

You’ve seen this. In our own day, how common is it to approach a dilemma, a question, or an issue and then think, “Hmmm... what do I think about this thing?” and then go to the Bible for statements that appear to back up whatever I want to be true?

In discussions on issues ranging from human sexuality to child rearing to immigration to the environment, we find it easy to pick and choose the verses that remind us about how right we are.

And when we do this, we fall into the trap of separating the Word of God from the Power or Presence of God. When we weaponize the Gospel – when we take words, phrases, chapters, and verses and throw them at each other, hit our neighbors over the head, or wave them at other in a menacing fashion, then we repeat the errors of the Sadducees and the Pharisees.

And you say, “But Dave, we read the Bible all the time. We acknowledge the scriptures. In fact, in order to be elected as an officer around here we have to say that we ‘accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God’s Word’ to us. Just how are we supposed to read the Bible, to rely on the Bible, to use the Bible, but not to be guilty of weaponizing it or of worshiping it?”

A number of us spent some time recently immersed in a book entitled *A New Kind Of Christianity*,² in which author Brian McLaren makes a compelling case that we might rightly view the writings of the Bible as a God-given community library. Instead of presenting a single narrative or undisputed set of facts, his readers are encouraged to view the sacred texts as a record of actions, conversations, and interpretations that are vital, informative, authoritative, and yet *not divorced from our own experience*.

This idea is pursued further in Rob Bell’s *What is the*

² *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions that are Transforming the Faith* (HarperOne, 2010).

Bible?³, wherein he encourages readers of scripture *not* to ask “Why did God say such and such?” Instead, Bell argues, some of the prime questions we bring to the scriptures ought to be, “Why did people write this down? Why did they tell it to their children?” To that I would add my own interpretation, which is namely, “How is it that God has allowed this story to be preserved for us in this way? What is there to be gained from reading it in our own day?”

Mark told his first readers, and they recorded it for us, that Jesus said “God is the God of the living.” If that is the case then it is incumbent on us, the living, to engage with the scripture as we have received it. We must seek to uncover, recover, or discover the Divine intent to the end that every part of our lives and every aspect of our behavior puts us closer to the place where we can honor God. We do not read it in order to satisfy some sort of self-improving checklist; and we dare not read it in order to cast judgment on our neighbor, or with the intention of bringing shame on another.

I think that what is happening in this story is that Jesus is inviting the Sadducees, his disciples, and us to the difficult task of attending to each other and participating in the life of the world around us that recognizes our rightful places as those who have been created in the image of God. We are called to live in such a way as to point to a reality beyond where we are now: a reality in which love, life, grace, hope, and indeed resurrection are normative.

I know, I know – it’s tempting to take it easy and fall back on the bumper stickers, the memes, the ball caps, and the slogans... but the reality is that none of those things are sufficient as we seek to identify as Christians who have been given an appreciation for the living, powerful Word of God.

³ *What is the Bible?* (HarperOne, 2017)

May God protect us from using the Bible to harm others, or to devalue ourselves, or to diminish life. May God instead grant us courage of conviction, freedom of trust, and a willingness to engage each other, the Scripture, and our neighbor in a quest to live authentically under the reign and rule of the living God. Amen.