

"Understanding Scripture" based on Hebrews 4:12-16 and Mark 10:17-31

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One of my favorite things to do when I feel in need of an outside voice, is to open the bible at random and point to a random spot on the page. More often than not, thanks to the Holy Spirit, what I read is relevant to that moment. I'm sure many of you open the bible for just the same random message. How often do you find it is something you need to hear, right now, at this point in time?

The first line of our reading from Hebrews is, "Indeed the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword." "Living and active", maybe we could even say relevant? The letters of the disciples were saved and copied, to be shared among other believers as a way of understanding God's purpose for us. To read and study the Word of God recorded in those letters is to understand God's purpose for us.

While Hebrews describes the Word of God as "living and active", John (1:14) says the Word becomes flesh and "lives" among us. Both of these texts, refer to the recorded Word as active and vibrant to today's needs. It is not left as mild random thoughts left in the dust of an ancient world. The Gospels also refer to "The Word" as a Sword and a Judge, helping us to understand Jesus's message and the need to serve others. Ephesians (6:17) calls it a "sword of the spirit", referring to present day guidance delivered to us from the Holy Spirit. The Words of the New Testament interpret the law as a judge, exposing our innermost being and executing judgement while extending mercy. We know that a sword can get to the heart of any matter, leaving "nothing hidden from God" (Rom 8:27, 1 Cor 4:5 and 1Thess 2:4), bringing the intentions and thoughts found in our hearts to light. By reading and trying to understand the Word, we are able to strip and trim down, layer by layer before our God, showing not only our deeds, but also our intentions, exposing all of the reasoning behind our actions. This vulnerability is listed in Hebrews as leaving us naked and laid bare to the eyes of God as our judge. Like Adam and Eve, in Genesis, nothing is hidden from the eyes of a God who sees everything. This same God is the God who reveals His mercy and grace. A God of compassion and forgiveness.

The writer of Hebrews, understands the potential power found in words. They call God's words - sharp, active and living. It is because God anticipates our challenges in life that we can boldly approach God in pursuit of mercy, grace and forgiveness. The words found in these ancient texts speak to our pains, our struggles, hopes and dreams. The divine voice, speaks to us now, as it did to those in the past. Canadian Charles Taylor, reminds us that 500 years ago we lived in a society in which belief in a God, as found in the bible, was so presumed, that it would have been hard to not believe in such a God. Today, that assumption, is very difficult to hold, we have seen a major shift in the "conditions of belief". In today's world belief or even reading ancient texts seem odd, strange and sometimes can be mis-judged. But we as Christians find strength, understanding and hope in the Words found in the bible. Words and prayers continually interact in a dance of listening and speaking. We find that God speaks and we listen. In response,

we also find, that when we speak, God listens. Hearing and praying become bound together when we read God's words. Understanding becomes clear and the message sharing the need to serve is revealed, even when we poke that finger at random pages.

Jesus' teachings, often repeated the need to serve and as in today's message from Mark, no one seemed to understand. In today's gospel we see a good pious man run up to Jesus asking, "What must I do to gain eternal life". Jesus gives an answer, including a phrase not found in the text of the Old Testament Commandments. He adds "You shall not defraud". The man and the disciples understood the message as "give away every last cent you have". He left grieving, that he just could not follow that command, but the message to this man was - to be fair in his dealings. Hearing and understanding are often two different things. How many times have I read the same sentence in the bible and heard a different message or emphasis on a different word? How many times will you and I read the same sentence and hear something totally different? The words are the same for each of us, the message delivered is different. The understanding, the listening and the need, at the time, is what makes the difference. Thanks to the Word and the Holy Spirit, we will each hear what God intends for us to hear. How we react, how we take the message to serve, and use the understanding is up to us and how well we listen. The wealthy man showed submission and respect to Jesus, he wanted to learn. Jesus in return, reminded him of the commandments, yet he did not hear what he wanted to hear, turning away as if rejected, with no hope of salvation.

God alone". Jesus recognizes that none of us are perfect, we all make mistakes and God in his wisdom and mercy will make allowances for honest mistakes. Understanding is not easy. Job (23:4-5) states, "I would learn what He would answer me, and understand what He would say to me". We often are not ready to hear the answers we receive but we need to consider our response and imitate Jesus. Jesus responded to the wealthy man and the disciples just as God did to Job, salvation is God's doing, from God's own righteousness, rather than something people can gain on their own (Job 38:1 - 40:2). Mark (10:27) says, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God: for God all things are possible". The only person in Mark's story who truly understood was Bartimaeus, who threw off his cloak and followed Jesus into Jerusalem (10:50-52), showing that the last person in this chapter becomes the first (10:31).

Like the young wealthy man, we are called to read and know the commandments, recognizing them as foundational to our life as Christians. Jesus expects us to not only live by them but to apply them as they apply to us individually. We can't miss the point, knowing them is not enough if we do not apply the individual meaning to our own lives. As in the case of the young man, someone cannot cheat, in order to maintain one's wealth. Jesus added the admonition against defrauding to emphasize how wealth is accumulated. We today are impressed by wealth, as we see the gap between the rich and the poor widening. Since few of us consider ourselves wealthy, we could consider this a warning for only the rich, but it is a statement that we should give up whatever is holding us back from loving God completely and following his Word and examples.

By reading and understanding the scriptures, we can understand that “things of this world” stop us from giving God our whole heart and following in the footsteps of Jesus. How can we understand the words of the Gospel and Jesus Himself, if we do not read what is written, if we do not allow ourselves time to digest what is written and allow the Holy Spirit to understand what His words mean to us? The scriptures speak to us individually, if we will open our minds and our hearts and listen to what He is saying to us. If I were to give the same scripture to six people, I will guarantee the Holy Spirit will guide each of the six Christians in different directions, if they were to listen closely and follow what they heard. The message delivered is active and alive, and it is relevant to today.

Mark (10:45) tells us “The son of man did not come to be served, but to serve.” Jesus instructs his followers to serve as a means to salvation. He further states that “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and the servant of all.” (9:35) To serve the needy comes as a liberating word, rather than a demand. Take a moment this week to understand what God is telling you. Let your fingers do the walking if you must. Allow them point the way, but take a moment to digest and understand that although we are not perfect, we are still meant to be followers, believers and receivers of God’s Word.

May the Grace and Peace of the Lord and the Holy Spirit be with you always, today and every day. Amen.

Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in ***bold italics***.

Mark 10:17-31 (NRSV) As he was setting out on a journey, a ***man*** ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “***Good*** Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ***Jesus*** said to him, “Why do you ***call*** me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not ***commit*** adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not ***bear*** false ***witness***; You shall not defraud; ***Honor*** your father and mother.’” He said to him, “***Teacher***, I have kept all these since my ***youth***.” Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one ***thing***; go, ***sell*** what you own, and ***give*** the ***money*** to the ***poor***, and you will have ***treasure*** in ***heaven***; then come, ***follow*** me.” When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many ***possessions***. Then Jesus looked around and said to his ***disciples***, “How hard it will be for those who have ***wealth*** to enter the ***kingdom*** of God!” And the disciples were perplexed at these ***words***. But Jesus said to them again, “***Children***, how ***hard*** it is to enter the kingdom of ***God***! It is easier for a camel to go through the ***eye*** of a ***needle*** than for someone who is ***rich*** to ***enter*** the kingdom of God.” They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus ***looked*** at them and said, “For ***mortals*** it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” ***Peter*** began to say to him, “Look, we have ***left*** everything and followed you.” Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left ***house*** or brothers or sisters or mother or ***father*** or children or fields, for my sake and for the ***sake*** of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, ***mothers*** and children, and ***fields*** with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal ***life***. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”