



WORD PERFECT

Isaiah 40:6-8, II Timothy 3:14-17, Revelation 10:8-10

The October 8th edition of the “USA Today” newspaper shared a fascinating story about a man named A. J. Jacobs. It seems that Mr. Jacobs spent an entire year trying to follow the Bible as literally as possible. It seems that he spent a year:

- eating crickets and wild honey,
- herding sheep – living in the wilderness,
- wearing a robe and sandals,
- and not shaving.

You can question the list of things he felt compelled to do – but at least he was trying to live out and experience the word beyond the sacred page.¹

I wonder what would have happened if Mr. Jacobs had literally followed these commands from sacred scripture:

- Go, sell what you have and give it to the poor,
- Remember the Sabbath,
- Love your neighbor,
- Seek justice – love mercy,
- Be not anxious,
- Forgive 70 x 7,
- Pray constantly – be joyful,
- Look after orphans and widows in their need,
- Pick up your cross – follow me,
- Ye must be born again.

On this Sunday known as National Bible Sunday – I want to share for a few moments why I believe the Bible is the original ‘Word Perfect’ – and why our sacred journey is the original course in Word Processing 101. The purpose of this message is not to give an emotional appeal to defend the Bible as the inspired – God-breathed – infallible word of God. As the great preacher, Dr. Spurgeon, once said “I don’t have to do that. There is no need to defend a lion when he is being attacked. All we have to do is open the gate – and let the lion out. The lion will defend itself.”²

Can any of you remember that song we sang in Sunday School?

**The B-I-B-L-E, Yes that's the book for me,
I stand alone on the Word of God,
The B-I-B-L-E.**

The United Methodist Church is part of what we call the Protestant or Evangelical tradition. As theologian Richard Foster shares, "The Evangelical witness affirms the primacy of scripture as the only infallible rule of faith and practice." It is the authority over all the other would-be authorities in our life.

The evangelical tradition is comprised of 3 great themes:

- The faithful proclamation of the gospel message.
- The centrality of scripture in the life of the church and its converts.
- The confessional witness of the early Christian community found in the teaching of the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed.³

The great reformers – like Luther, Calvin, and Wesley – ushered many changes into the body of Christ – but they never changed one single word of these great creeds. They submitted themselves in obedience to their authority because every truth expressed in them can be documented in the word of God. Mary and I have had the privilege to worship 6 times at the Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church where Dr. Kennedy preached and on 3 occasions they said the 'Nicene Creed' and 3 times the 'Apostle's Creed.' So I affirm and believe in every truth expressed in them. With reverence and obedience I submit to their great truths.

We learn from the Sermon on the Mount that we must be very careful in deciding what carpenter we allow to build our church, our house, our life. My boss is a Jewish carpenter named Jesus. The evangelical tradition simply believes and preaches that Christ is the only sure and strong foundation.

This is why **Isaiah 40:8** proclaims "the grass withers and the flower fades; but the word of our God stands forever." Even the great social justice prophet Amos proclaimed that the greatest famine is not for food or bread – but the word of God (**Amos 8:11**).

We simply believe in the evangelical tradition that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. Yes, this is evangelical Christianity at her best. So regardless of whether it was:

- Zacchaeus, the tax collector
- Mary Magdalene
- The persistent Canaanite woman
- The Roman centurion
- Nicodemus the Pharisee
- The woman at the well.

The doors of the kingdom were thrown wide open – whosoever may come. The kingdom of God’s love has been made available to all. It is no longer restricted and mediated through a special people and special religious class. In Jesus – the Living Word – this all was transformed.⁴ When the word of God is at our center – then we truly have a center which holds in all seasons.

I often tell the story of a devoted Jewish believer who visited with his Rabbi to learn more about living right with God. The man said, “I have read through the entire Torah five times.”

“Great!” said the Rabbi, “**but how much of the Torah has gone through to your heart?**”

This past year I read through Eugene H. Peterson’s latest offering **EAT THIS BOOK**. The book had so much to say – I just completed my second read of it. We are not to merely read the Bible – but eat and digest every word of it. He reminds us that “Christians feed on scripture. Holy scripture nurtures the Christian Church as food nurtures the human body. Christians don’t simply learn or study or use scripture – we assimilate it. It engages us. It gets translated into cups of cold water – mission trips – evangelism – justice – mercy in Jesus’ name.”⁵ Christianity is not a philosophy – it is a way of life – a way of seeing.

Word processing – or processing the word – is a journey that begins at conversion but lasts an entire lifetime. It is because this book tackles head on the toughest questions of life – that it requires not only words – but a relationship with the author of the book.

Yes, the reading of sacred scripture is not an activity detached or separated from living the gospel – but is actually integral to it. It means letting Christ have a voice in everything we say and do. It is as easy as that – it is as hard as that.⁶

Today we read three lessons from the bible and share responsively **Psalms 119**. There is a reason we call them lessons. There is an expectation that we are students – learners – disciples of Jesus Christ. As our reading from **Revelation 10:9** shares, “sometimes the lesson comforts us – sometimes it convicts us – and sometimes it even corrects us. This is all part of what John Wesley called our ‘Constant Conversion.’”

II Timothy 3:16 boldly teaches us that all scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching and instruction. In **Psalms 119:14** we are taught, “In the way of thy testimonies I delight, as much as in all riches.” We are further instructed in **Psalms 119:105**, “Thy word is a lamp to my feet and light to my path.” The primary function of the preacher and the church body is to study God’s word and to apply its eternal truth to our contemporary settings in life. W. H. Auden once declared, “That the Bible is the news that is always ‘new’ and good.”

We live in a time of ‘**designer doctrine.**’ People think they can pick and choose what to believe based on their desires and preferences. But it is a worthless pursuit.⁷

The church must be more than fellowship and discussion because if it isn't resourced by the Bible it just becomes 'pooled' ignorance. John Wesley said, "We are to be a **people of one book**. This one book is to judge all the other books that we read for their accuracy and their trustworthiness."

It was the great Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, who developed what we call the Great Protestant Principle, "Sola scriptura." It is by scripture alone that we discover and learn the ultimate will of God and respond in obedience to its claim.

One of our great bishops, Dr. William Willimon, is bold to declare that "a congregation is Christian to the degree that it is confronted by and attempts to form its life in response to the word of God.⁸ Yes, Christianity is a people who begin with the action of taking up the scroll and being confronted with the stories of God.⁹

Great renewal and passion has returned to the institutional church when God has called servants Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Wesley to return the church to a renewed authority and focus on the word of God.

In the life of our great nation I would like to share the witness of 2 of our greatest presidents. When my wife and I toured the Mount Vernon home of George Washington – it was shared by the guide how George Washington rose from his bed at 5:00 a.m. every morning and spent the first hour on his knees with an open Bible. He retired every night at 9:00 p.m. to the same place – to read and pray before the open Bible.

Abraham Lincoln was asked what one book he believed he had mastered in his lifetime – and without hesitation he said, "**The Bible.**" If you have ever read or heard some of Abe's speeches like the Gettysburg Address – you know where he derived his integrity and inspiration from.

Our own mentor, John Wesley, taught his lay preachers, "I want to know one thing. The way to heaven. God himself has condescended to teach me in that way. He has written it down in a book. O, give me that book. At any price give me the book of God. Let me be a man of one book."

That book, of course, was the Holy Bible. John Wesley knew that only by processing the word – could we be pointed to God. Only by processing the word could we begin to fashion a life that was in harmony with our Creator. Only in this book do we find the real 'Word Perfect' and the greatest 'Outlook Express' ever conceived of.

Let me close today with 2 illustrations. In Montgomery, Alabama a certain husband and wife got into a heated discussion about the Bible. The argument got so intense that the wife – with force – started hitting and assaulting the husband with her Bible. She knocked him out – and he received several stitches in his scalp when a neighbor called 911. Whatever truth she was trying to get across lost all its validity and purpose with her methods. Jesus said, "I am the Way and the Truth. . ." Rick Warren said – which was included in our most recent newsletter – "The Bible was not given to us to increase our knowledge – but to change our lives."

During the 1800's a group of British sailors committed an act of treason against the British crown and His Majesty's Ship – a mutiny on the bounty. After they seized the ship – they hid out on an unknown island in the South Pacific. Here they were able to hide from British law and justice for many years.

However, the greatest problem they faced was not the British authorities – but themselves. After all, they were a group of criminals, con artists, and cutthroats. They lived a very desperate and dangerous life. They started killing and murdering each other off. The prospect of building a thriving community was bleak indeed.

One day – one of the crooks named Alexander Smith – finds a Bible that his dear mother has placed in his trunk unknown to him. He begins to actually read it – since there are no HBO and WWF wrestling matches in those days.

His life begins to change – and he starts to teach the truths of the Bible to the other men. Soon most of these cutthroats and crooks are converted. When they were discovered by the British authorities – they found an almost perfect community. There wasn't a single jail because there was no crime! Every family had been touched by the power of the word of God. No other book placed in his trunk could have led to such a transformation. That is the amazing power of this book and message – if it can penetrate our hearts – minds – and wills. That is why read – preach – and eat this book. That is why the Bible – **the B-I-B-L-E** – is the book for me.

What would happen to this church – this nation – if we for one entire year lived biblically – both in the truth and in the way of Jesus? As Eugene Peterson shares: "It means letting Christ have a voice in everything we say and do. It is as easy as that – it is as hard as that."¹⁰

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
November 18, 2007 – 10:30 a.m. service
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ENDNOTES

¹ Thanks to James Harnish, "**Monday Memo**," October 9th, 2007, First UMC, Birmingham, MI, for sharing this story.

² Richard J. Foster, **STREAMS OF LIVING WATER**, Harper: San Francisco, Paperback edition, 2001, page 222.

³ Ibid, Foster, page 219.

⁴ Ibid, Foster, pages 141-145.

⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, **EAT THIS BOOK**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 2006, page 18.

⁶ Ibid, Peterson, page XII.

⁷ Charles F. Stanley, **LIFE PRINCIPLES BIBLE NKJV**, Thomas Nelson, Inc., Nashville, TN, 2005, page 1429.

⁸ William H. Willimon, **SHAPED BY THE BIBLE**, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, 1990, page 11.

⁹ Ibid, Willimon, page 17.

¹⁰ Ibid, Peterson, page XII.