



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

What Is Your Source of Truth?

SERMON BY REV. STEVEN GRANT ■ SEPTEMBER 11, 2022

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?” ⁶¹But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, “Do you take offense at this? ⁶²Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? ⁶³It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴But there are some of you who do not believe.” (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) ⁶⁵And he said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.”

⁶⁶After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. ⁶⁷So Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?” ⁶⁸Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, ⁶⁹and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.” ⁷⁰Jesus answered them, “Did I not choose you, the twelve? And yet one of you is a devil.” ⁷¹He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray him.

John 6:60-71 (ESV)

One of the great blessings of my youth was the result of being taught by my parents to respect my elders, and I had enough sense to pay attention to them when they spoke to me. Now by elders, I do not mean only the older adults of my church, though there were certainly

included, but also the Ruling Elders of the church. I confess that I did not always heed what they said to me, but I did take notice of what they said. Looking back on it, one key thing that sticks in my mind from my mentors, my teachers, my elders, and those who took an interest in me is that they kept repeating, "Steven, search the Scriptures." And to assist me, they gave me Bibles and books to read. When I look back on it, I believe that really had a profound impact on me.

It is interesting the things that influence us during our childhood. In my case, since I was so involved in the musical activity in the community around St. Louis, outside of school I spent much more time with adults than I did with my own peers. The wisdom they were willing to pour into me and their willingness to listen proved to be a great blessing to me.

It is not always easy for young people to imagine older people as ever having been young. To them, everything is new, as if older people had never faced what they are facing, and they might think that older people just cannot relate to or understand what young people are going through. Likewise, sometimes older adults do not pay attention to what young people have to say. Nevertheless, the fact is that though the context may be different, and the players may be different, the basic principles of life are the same. Human nature has not changed, and the human condition has not changed. The world has changed in many ways, but God has not!

That is why King Solomon wrote in the book of Ecclesiastes these words that at first glance do not always resonate with us. However, the more we think about these verses, they become quite profound for us. Solomon was a man who had a long life and experienced many things. He wrote in Ecclesiastes 1:9-11,

What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done,
and there is nothing new under the sun.

¹⁰Is there a thing of which it is said,
“See, this is new”?

It has been already
in the ages before us.

¹¹There is no remembrance of former things,
nor will there be any remembrance
of later things yet to be
among those who come after.

This is why we want students to study history and literature and to learn from the experiences of those who have gone before. It is why the Old Testament story of the Exodus is told over and over again so the Israelites would never forget. The problem in any era, and certainly in our own, is that we cannot readily see where our current trends are leading. We can only see the moment or as far as the next few weeks. We do not see how the seeds of the unintended consequences are being sown. We cannot see the future. Then, when we finally get a few years down the road, we forget what has transpired in the past.

In Ecclesiastes 9:13-18, Solomon writes this little story:

I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me. ¹⁴There was a little city with few men in it, and a great king came against it and besieged it, building great siegeworks against it. ¹⁵But there was found in it a poor, wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one re-membered that poor man. ¹⁶But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard.

¹⁷The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. ¹⁸Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

We forget the wisdom of those who went before, and how one sinner can cause great damage by not having learned from the experience of the past. What source of wisdom do we prefer to draw upon?

Pilate, as it turned out, asked the question of the ages, "What is truth?" (John 18:38). He asked that question with the Truth standing right in front of him. Earlier Jesus had said, "I am the Way, and the **Truth**, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

But it was when Jesus continued that some followers walked away. "'This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.' After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him" (John 6:65-66).

Oddly enough, it was Peter, clumsy Peter, who had enough sense to recognize that there was nowhere else better to go. When Jesus looked at the twelve and asked, "Do you want to go away as well?" It was Peter who said "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God" (verses 68-69). Peter got it! Later in the Book of Acts Peter testified before the Sanhedrin and declared in no uncertain terms "there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

I know that at different times in human history and certainly in our own era there are many people who say things like, "All roads lead to God." If you really believe that you have a problem with the Garden of Gethsemane. Remember in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus was pleading with God and praying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me" (Matthew 26:39). He was asking if there were any other way; but as He had taught others to pray, He continued, "...not as I will, but as you will." If **all** roads lead to God, why would He allow His Son to endure such unspeakable pain? In fact, we are saved because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He paid the price for us; He gave His **all** for you and for me. We, His people, were bought with His blood.

In this information age of ours, there are a multitude of sources vying for our attention, attempting to shape the way we think, the

values we adopt, our spending habits, our opinions, and our actions. Companies spend millions of dollars on one 30-second commercial during the Super Bowl because they know they have such a large audience and that the 30-second exposure might get some to change their minds and behaviors. Imagine the all-day-long bombardment of input from these various sources, perspectives, and versions of the “truth”: TV and radio, print media, internet, social media; will it affect our thinking and actions? As disciples of Jesus, each one of us must ask the questions, “What impacts us the most? What is going to shape who we are? What will shape the fundamental life principles in our worldview? What is going to guide us in our living, our habits, our attitudes, the formation of our character, our view of life, faith, and our ultimate destiny?”

I remember when the Lord finally led me to accept the call to seminary. I think the elders of the church thought that all the time and effort they had put into me was starting to bear fruit! I was excited about going to seminary and earning a master’s degree from a prestigious school. Until that time, I had been a musician and I did not know much about theology. In large part, I had many wonderful experiences. However, at my seminary, they were teaching some cutting-edge, worldly stuff, and I was completely confused. What were they talking about? I had a monumental spiritual crisis! Looking back, I recognize that all that I heard greatly impacted the first years of my ministry in a negative way.

I remember sitting and looking at my diploma; I had earned a master’s degree—one of the first in my family to have done so—but in my head and my heart I heard George Doerbaum, Ruth and Jim Godwin, Ida Short, my uncle Paul, and my parents all saying to me, “Steven, search the Scriptures.” If not for the foundation that the saints of Richmond Heights Presbyterian Church had given me along with several colleagues from a group called Presbyterians for Renewal, Lord knows where I would be today.

In 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Paul wrote to his protégé Timothy,

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”

God’s Word is the basis for understanding new discoveries and interpreting new experiences. In the end, even when we experience things that we think are new (although Solomon tells us nothing is new in the end), what grounds us in all circumstances of life, what principles do we hold onto, and who are we in Jesus? Sometimes, as with some of the followers of Jesus, we find a teaching too difficult. A passage in Scripture just does not seem to resonate, so we walk away. We do not get it and do not want to deal with it.

My encouragement to all of you when you encounter a passage of Scripture that does not seem to resonate with you is do not try to avoid it, rationalize it away, declare it old-fashioned and not relevant for today, or not really the Word of God as much as another part is. I encourage you to do as Jacob did in the Old Testament.

Old Jacob had figured out that his way of doing things was not working anymore and that Esau, his brother, was very angry and about to confront him. Jacob stayed up all night wrestling with a man to get a blessing. During the process of that struggle, the man (perhaps he was an angel?) touched his hip and dislocated it. The point was that sometimes when we wrestle for a blessing from God and are trying to come to a vision of the truth, it hurts. Sometimes we must give something up, sometimes a part of us must change, and sometimes it is not comfortable. After the all-night wrestling match, Jacob approached Esau in an entirely new way, and they reconciled. It is the same with Scripture—you wrestle with it for however long it takes to get a blessing from the passage.

I sometimes wonder why I had such a passion for pursuing a music career. I spent a big part of my life studying, and still do, only to find

that it was not God's intent for my life. I think, however, that it really prepared me for the discipline of studying the Word of God.

Let me explain what I mean. When you are a performer, that is a recreative artist, you are performing something that someone else has written. All you have are little symbols on the page, little notes and lines, little words and different indications to tell you something about what the composer wanted. As a responsible interpretive artist, you cannot just reproduce those notes mechanically; you must get behind those notes to understand what the composer really meant. All the composer has is the language of notes, but what did he or she really mean? If you were to gather 10 great artists and listen to their performances of the same piece, you would notice some different nuances. But the goal is the same: to discover what the *composer* meant. That is more than just knowing what all the little jots and tittles mean, although it includes that. A conductor, for example, must know everyone in the orchestra is playing because it is a fact that in a great work of art nothing is superfluous. Everything is there because the composer intended it. Musicians often say, "the truth is in the score."

A wonderful story about my musical hero Leonard Bernstein is that he was at the piano studying a Tchaikovsky symphony that he had conducted many, many times. One of his students came into his apartment, and before he even said, "Hello," Bernstein asked, "Why is that note a B-natural? Why is it not a B-flat? Listen to it." He played it one way, then played it the other way and said, "B-flat makes more sense. Why did Tchaikovsky specifically choose a B-natural in that instance? I must figure this out before I rehearse this piece for tomorrow." He asked the question because the master composer knew exactly what he wanted.

It is the same way with Scripture. We must approach the Word of God with the attitude and faith that the truth is in the text. It is not what we add to it or ignore. There is nothing in Scripture that is superfluous. There is nothing of importance missing; everything is

there for a reason. We ask questions of the text. Why did the writer use this word instead of another? Why did the writer include this fact and not these other facts? The fact that something is missing would be a good clue about the true focus of the passage. Why are things written in this order? What is the context of the passage? What preceded this and what follows it?

Do not forget, anytime you study a passage of Scripture you should bring in all other passages about the same subject. Seek a comprehensive view of the Bible message. Even when you encounter your favorite passages, read them over and over again. When you go back, like Bernstein, you may discover something you never noticed before. You may be in a different place in your spiritual life, or you may have experienced more in life and deepened your faith. You may read a familiar passage and find a truth that has always been there, but that you never noticed before. When you engage God's Word at this level, a wealth of spiritual enrichment is revealed to deepen your relationship with Jesus.

Friends, this is exactly what the early church did while the apostles were still with them as described by Luke in Acts 2:42, "And they **devoted** themselves to the apostles' teaching..." They wanted to make sure they got the story right. They knew the importance of apostolic authority. They were the ones who saw Jesus do everything that He did. They were the ones who heard what He said, and they were the ones who passed down all that information to us as recorded in the Bible.

The early believers had the benefit of **being** there with the apostles, and they devoted themselves to making sure they learned what Jesus said and did. In fact, that was the criteria by which all the books were selected for the New Testament. When the early church fathers were trying to decide what our New Testament would include, they determined that the writings had to be specifically written by an apostle or based on apostolic authority. One of Paul's greatest concerns was about false teachers. He wanted to ensure that the Story was right!

I encourage you to read Chapter 20 of the Book of Acts when Paul was taking leave of the Ephesians after ministering there for three years. He had called the elders together to give them a final exhortation. When you read it, you can feel Paul's heart. You can feel him pouring out his concern for the Ephesians. He reminded them of how he had taught the people, not just in public but also going house to house in person. Their salvation and their faith in Jesus Christ were so important to him that he exhorted them with tears to make sure they got the story right. Why? Because they were the people that Jesus **purchased** with His blood! Paul said, "I did not shrink from declaring to you **the whole counsel of God**" (Acts 20:27). He did not skip over anything.

Paul told them all would be well while he was with them, but once he left there would be challenges. Listen to what he said in Acts 20:28-30.

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.
²⁹I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.

Paul told them that after he left, some people would try to influence them with worldly values and worldly ways of doing things. There would even be people **within** the church who would arise and teach things they should not be teaching.

Pastors and Elders have the responsibility of ensuring that what is taught in the Church is from the Word of God. All Christians need to do their part as well. They must devote themselves to the apostles' teaching and search the Scriptures. They must determine what they really believe about Bible and the revelations it contains and ask themselves, "What is the ultimate source of truth?" Is it a worldly perspective? Is it a personal perspective? Is it the perspective of a favorite celebrity?

I will forever be grateful to the mentors of my youth—praise God for them! I beseech you to search the Scriptures, wrestle with them, and be blessed by them. It has been the historic perspective of the Church that the Bible **is** the Word of God. It does not just contain it, it is not just “sort of,” it **is** the Word of God given to us by the Holy Spirit. This is the belief of your pastoral staff and your elders. The Bible teaches us that when the Word goes out, it does not return empty. God’s Word will lead you by revealing His truth. The Word will be the lamp for your feet in this life and in the life to come. Amen. ■



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