

The Good Book - Authoritative

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Date: 09 February 2020

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[0 : 00] We have reached the fifth and final leg of this series that we've been doing over recent weeks. A series called The Good Book, where we've hopefully been getting under the skin of the Bible as a book, that we might really understand how we're meant to read it, and what difference the understanding that we have might make to our faith and how we relate to God.

And just to say, before we get into this final session, thanks very much indeed for the attentive nature in which we've been engaging with this and a positive feedback which you've had from this, which is encouraging.

I appreciate it's been a fair bit to take in each week, quite a lot of content and sort of dense stuff. And also you've had me up here preaching for a number of consecutive weeks now, which is not normally the way we do at St John's.

We try and mix it and match a little bit, so you've had a lot to go through, I know. But it just felt like the right approach to get some sort of continuity week by week. But I'll be stepping back a little bit for the next few weeks and we'll be dishing it around a bit more, which is good.

But yeah, I appreciate the way we've been able to unpack this one together. But if you've been here or you've caught up online, you'll be aware and recall hopefully that we've been exploring the ways in which the Bible.

[1 : 08] First week we looked at is primarily a book of wisdom, which invites us to weigh things up with God for ourselves. We saw how it's an inspired book, but that we mean God-breathed.

Not that it's dictated by God, but that it has God's breath put on the very human words which are found in the Bible's pages. A couple of weeks ago we saw how diverse the Bible is, written by all sorts of people, with all sorts of views from all sorts of time periods.

And then last week we considered how progressive the Bible is. By that we mean the way in which different writers' views and understandings of God have changed and developed over the thousand years or more that the Bible was put together.

And so this week as we come to the final session, what I'd like us to explore really is what we might understand when we say that the Bible has authority. What do we mean by that?

To what extent is the Bible authoritative for our lives? And if we look at this word authority, we may have negative or positive views of it, I'm sure.

[2 : 17] But I guess we could define it as the power to influence or command thought, opinion or behavior. The power to influence or command.

And so perhaps, I don't know what kind of picture you think of when we hear about the word authority. Perhaps you get this kind of image in mind, you know, someone leading from the front with authority so that others follow in their footsteps.

Alternatively, this kind of image might spring to mind where authority means perhaps someone telling a group of people, you know, listen to me. I'm the norm of authority. We're going to do things this way because I'm in charge and this is how it is.

I guess they're both kind of common, legit ways to understand authority perhaps. And yet there's a risk, I wonder, if we understand the authority which the Bible is said to have in this kind of way. You know, this is how it is and we've just got to do what the Bible says. Because the Bible, as we've been seeing, is such a diverse and progressive book, I think there's a risk we can get tangled up pretty quickly in knowing how to put what the Bible says into practice.

[3 : 28] For example, I know there are many people who would say that they believe in the biblical view of marriage. You hear people say, I believe in a biblical view of marriage and I live under the authority of the Bible.

Sounds like a good thing to say. But the question is, what is meant by the biblical view of marriage? Do we mean the fact that, say, someone like Solomon had 300 wives and 900 concubines, you know, effectively sex slaves on the side?

Is that the biblical view of marriage that we've got in mind? Polygamy as being normal and extreme polygamy in Solomon's case. Or is a biblical view of marriage that we would believe in arranged marriage, for example, when a father would negotiate a bride price in order for his daughter to marry into a certain family.

Mary and Joseph probably had an arranged marriage. That was what betrothal was all about in the first century. Would we want the biblical view of arranged marriage to be in place for our children? Alternatively, does a biblical view of marriage mean that the husband is required to build an extension onto his parents' house so that he and his wife will then live in the family home?

[4 : 49] That's what the picture Jesus paints in John chapter 14 is all about. Remember when Jesus says, in my father's house are plenty of rooms and I'm going there to prepare a place for you. It's a picture of Jesus as the bridegroom preparing to take us, his bride, into the family home.

That's what happened in Jesus' day when you got married. You'd live with the parents. And while some parents, I'm sure, may want their newlywed offspring to live with them, I doubt that would be for everyone as well.

So, yeah, that's a biblical view of marriage. Or, does a biblical view of marriage mean that if a wife's husband dies, then a deceased husband's brother is obliged to marry his brother's widow?

That's a biblical view of marriage. Deuteronomy 25 verse 5. So, if you want that one in the mix. I can't say I've seen any Christians follow that particular law or model of marriage. And yet, it's what the Bible says we're to do.

You see, it's not quite as simple as saying, yeah, I believe in a biblical view of marriage or I'm a Bible-believing Christian. Because there are numerous views, particularly of marriage, which are pretty removed often for our modern understanding of what marriage is about today.

[6 : 07] In fact, when I hear people say, and it's quite a common phrase, this idea of I believe in a biblical view of this or I'm a Bible-believing Christian or you get churches saying we're a Bible-believing church.

It always intrigues me because I want to question what they actually mean by that. Because the Bible can be used to justify all sorts of different and conflicting beliefs, whether that's on marriage or on sexuality or on slavery or on gender issues.

So when we think about the Bible having authority, I'm not sure it can mean that we simply do what the Bible says because it's just not that simple to put that into practice.

And in fact, this word authority, I think I'd even want to challenge the assumption that it says the Bible even has authority in and of itself. Because that's not something which I think comes through the pages of the Bible when we read it.

See, the Bible never claims to have its own authority. Even classic verses like 2 Timothy 3.16, which we looked at the other week, they say this, All Scripture is useful.

[7 : 21] All Scripture is useful. Which is a very different understanding than saying all Scripture is authoritative. Instead, and this will set the tone for what we're thinking about this morning, I think we do well to listen to where true authority does rest.

Or rather, in whom it rests. Because again, as we were saying the other week, whenever there's a question, the answer is usually Jesus when we ask a question in church.

So in who does authority rest? That's right. It's Jesus himself. And the good news is, Jesus makes this claim pretty explicitly. So in Matthew's Gospel, we read this when Jesus says this, All authority, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

All authority has been given to Jesus. It's Jesus, the one we call the Word of God, the author and perfecter of our faith, who has all authority.

It's to him we look to. It's to him we defer. It's to him we bend the knee. It's under his authority we stand. And knowing that all authority resides in Jesus, I think that helps to put the Bible's authority into perspective.

[8 : 36] So think about it perhaps this way. There's a Scottish biblical scholar called James Barr. He puts it like this. He says, Christian faith is not faith in the Bible.

Not primarily. It is faith in Christ as the one through whom we come to God and faith that through the Bible, we meet him and he communicates with us.

The Bible is thus the instrument of faith and the expression of faith rather than the object of faith. The Bible is the instrument of faith. It's the expression of faith rather than the object of faith. And so if we were to say, yeah, the Bible, as with all things, comes under the authority of Jesus, I think it's worth exploring this morning how Jesus himself engages with the Bible or at least with the scriptures as he knew them in his time.

When we say about the scriptures, the Bible from Jesus' time, it's essentially the Old Testament. Obviously, the New Testament hadn't yet been written because it was all about Jesus. It was taking place as Jesus was alive.

[9 : 45] Although even the Old Testament wasn't finished in a way we've got it today in Jesus' time. There was lots of debate about which books should be included still. So even after Jesus went back to heaven, it wasn't the Old Testament as we've got it.

There were books like Esther and Ezekiel and Song of Songs. They were still debating about whether to include them in the Old Testament as we have it. And that came after Jesus had already ascended.

That aside though, Jesus certainly knew the scriptures as they existed in his day, some 30-something books. So it's worth asking, how did he engage with them?

And what's interesting and perhaps surprising for a start is that Jesus didn't use the scriptures to give authority to his words.

Now he knew that his authority came directly from God. This is my son whom I love, with whom I'm well pleased. He knew it came from God, not from any text.

[10 : 48] Now when Jesus taught, he spoke of his own wisdom, his own identity, his own experience. Yes, he'd sometimes allude and quote from the scriptures, but his authority came from who he was, not from what he quoted.

And so you get fascinating verses like one in Mark's gospel. When Jesus is teaching people, it says the people were amazed at Jesus teaching.

Why? Because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. In other words, he wasn't simply a Bible teacher like the scribes or the teachers of the law were.

No, he had his own authority. In fact, Jesus even underlines this point himself in John's gospel, where he criticizes those who put their faith in the scriptures rather than him.

He says this to them, you know, you diligently study the scriptures because you think that by them, you possess eternal life. These are the scriptures that testify about me, Jesus.

[11 : 53] Yet you refuse to come to me to have life. And so if Jesus knows it's him, not the scriptures that give people life, how does he use the scriptures then?

What are they there for? Because again, I think there seem to be a few main principles we can pick out from the way he does it which would be worth us thinking about today. And the main one, and again, perhaps surprisingly, Jesus actually doesn't quote the scriptures very often at all.

As we said, people were astonished that he didn't teach like the scribes and the teachers of the law, but from his own position, from his own authority. If we go back to that image we had the other week from Richard War, about a tricycle, about this idea of how we might best understand God, in which our experience is at the forefront.

It's the driving wheel, if you like. And then the Bible and the tradition that we're a part of back that up. I would say Jesus' life models this kind of understanding as well.

Jesus primarily teaches from his own experience, teaches from his own humanity, his own divinity as well. But it's the human stories which primarily come through, parables of fishermen and shepherds and traders and farmers and builders and so on, who he'd seen firsthand.

[13 : 17] It was the miracles that he performed and seeing people's lives changed in the flesh as a result. That's what people seem to be drawn to him about, rather than falling back on scripture or tradition to make his case.

And it's that, I think, which drew people to him. His life, his story, his authority, ultimately his love.

And I think there's perhaps a lesson in there for us about how we go about sharing our faith and our understanding of who God is.

Yes, we can use the Bible and there's an important place for that. But on the whole, I want to suggest that quoting the Bible at people, trying to sort of persuade or argue them into believing in God, isn't going to convince them of God's love.

Rather, the way we model and live out and share that love with them will be far more effective. What else?

Well, not only does Jesus not refer to scripture quite as often as we might think he does, he only refers to relatively limited parts of it. In fact, he never once quotes from 19 of the books in the Old Testament.

[14:36] They never get a mention from Jesus. Well over half the accepted scriptures of his time. Instead though, what he seems to do is focus on a few favourite books of the Bible.

So he's often quoting Exodus, Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Hosea, surprisingly, and the Psalms. I mean, we've all got favourite passages, we've all got favourite books of the Bible, I'm sure.

But it seems Jesus was the same. He had his top five books that he liked to draw on. So not only does he never reference whole chunks, whole books of the Bible, certainly in the Gospels that we've got, I think he also ignores a lot of what the Old Testament focuses on.

Again, if you flick through it, there's a lot of passages about violence and exclusion and so on. Jesus doesn't reference those. Shuns, it seems, those passages which seem to legitimise violence, which champion exclusion and who's in and who's out.

Doesn't mention particularly passages which obsess about purity and dietary requirements. Jesus doesn't seem to care much for those views.

[15:45] In fact, quite the opposite. So in Jesus' life, we see him working on the Sabbath. We see him touching lepers. He ignores the rules that says adulterous women should be stoned to death.

He welcomes the touch of a menstruating woman. He chooses to hold dead bodies. He endorses the consumption of so-called unclean foods and so on.

All things which various Old Testament laws prohibit, but laws which Jesus would seem to reinterpret or even reject as being irrelevant or misguided.

And importantly, he encourages his disciples, his followers, to follow in his footsteps and do the same. There's one key verse about how Jesus understands the scriptures, which is often used, where Jesus says this, I have not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them.

What does he mean by this? Fulfill as in diligently obey everything that the law says? I don't think that can be the case because he deliberately doesn't obey everything the law says.

[16:54] He gets told off for not doing so. Rather, I think, what Jesus means here is that he's talking about fulfilling the spirit, not the letter of the law.

Jesus is more concerned with the spirit of what the Bible talks about rather than the letter of it. What is the spirit of the law, of the scriptures? I think when Jesus is asked what the greatest commandment is, you know, alongside loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and so on, the classic one that pretty much you'd have expected him to say, he then adds to it this requirement to love your neighbor as yourself.

And I think this is fascinating because when we look where this commandment, love your neighbor as yourself, comes from, we see that Jesus actually quotes it in a very interesting way.

It comes from the book of Leviticus, chapter 19. And actually, this one commandment here is the only positive command among a long list of negative ones.

And yet Jesus picks it out. So here's the passage from Leviticus 19, just either side of this love your neighbor as yourself verse. It says this, do not go about spreading slander among your people.

[18:13] Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life. I am the Lord. Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so that you will not share in their guilt.

Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord. Keep my decrees. Do not make different kinds of animals.

Do not plant your field with two kinds of seeds. Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material. And so it goes on, these purity codes, if you like, in Leviticus.

But I think we see the fact that Jesus quotes the middle of this passage here. Not just how well he knew the scriptures, which he did. But the fact that he picks out this one almost kind of throwaway line in the middle, love your neighbor as yourself, at the end of lots of other sort of more negative ones.

He picks out, amongst all these do nots, he picks out the do, the positive command to love your neighbor as yourself. It's a tiny line, one which is dead easy just to miss in there.

[19:21] And yet for Jesus, because it's all about the spirit of the law, he gets it. And he says, actually, that is key. Love God, yes, but love your neighbor as yourself. This little line here, he says,

is the most important commandment alongside loving God, because that's what the spirit of the law is all about.

You know, there are 613 laws in the Old Testament and Jesus reduces it, boils them down to two. Love God, love your neighbor.

It's that simple, that hard in practice, but it's that simple in theory. That for Jesus is the spirit of the law, the spirit of the scripture. And so, because that's the case, Jesus reads the scriptures, he applies them, but he sometimes ignores, I think, what the Bible says in order that it is in line with these principles.

In fact, more than that though, he even raises the bar on what the Bible requires of us. So, time and time again in Matthew, in the Sermon on the Mount, for example, he says, you've heard that it was said, for example, eye for eye and tooth for tooth, but I tell you, do not take revenge on an evil person.

Jesus says, you've heard it say this in the Old Testament, but actually, I'm going to realign that. Don't take that as eye for eye and tooth for tooth. That's not standard. I'm going to raise the bar on this.

[20 : 48] In fact, Jesus holds us to the highest standards of all, and if that means updating and redefining scriptures, then so be it. Now, why is Jesus able to do this?

To reinterpret and update the scriptures? Because, as we said, all authority belongs to him. It's been given to him and if he wants to update an old teaching in the Bible, which doesn't get to the heart of who God is, he's going to realign it so that it does.

Now, for me, all this kind of understanding of how perhaps Jesus used the scriptures, I think it begs a question, which is perhaps key for us today. If Jesus can do this with the Bible, can we?

Can we speak in ways which have the same kind of authority that Jesus has? Can we share our experience of God in a way which will draw people to him in a way that the scriptures alone may not?

Can we update the Bible's principles for our own time? Applying the spirit of the Bible to the very different ethical and moral choices and questions which face us today.

[22 : 08] And for me, I think the answer is yes. I believe we can. And I say that not to diminish the importance of the Bible, but in fact quite the opposite.

To recognize it for what it is, which is the means by which we understand where our faith has come from but also the permission we have as modeled by Jesus for how to ensure that this God-breathed book continues to speak and be relevant for our lives today.

If we can get our heads around that, it's an amazing, daunting, and I think quite mind-blowing reality in that, yes, whilst all authority on heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus, he chooses by his spirit living in us to share that same authority with us as his people.

And so, when Jesus says this famous line, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me, it doesn't stop there. He carries on by saying, therefore go and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

Go. I give you my authority to bring people into a full knowledge of my love, to teach them my ways, including, perhaps, teaching them how to engage and how to know the spirit of the scriptures.

[23 : 39] The good news is that delegated authority from Jesus is not something that we do in our own strength, far from it, but solely in his. Because elsewhere in John's gospel, the resurrected Jesus says this to his amazed disciples.

He says, peace be upon you. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. And with that, he breathed on them, he inspired them and said, receive the Holy Spirit.

If you forgive anyone their sins, they are forgiven. If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven. There are big words, big words that Jesus says here.

It's not just that Jesus inhabits his disciples and people like us with his presence, with his spirit, but he delegates his authority to us as well.

And if we're in any doubt about how enormous that is and what that makes possible for us in the world, the last little quote from Jesus for now, hear this, what he says, very truly I tell you, very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing and they will do even greater things than these because I'm going to the Father.

[25 : 00] And I will do whatever you ask in my name so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. Now, I've always struggled with this passage because you think there is no way.

This cannot be true. This cannot be true that we will do even greater things than Jesus did when he was among us. And yet, I have to wrestle and it would be good for us all to wrestle with what does this mean in practice?

When Jesus says you will do even greater things than he's been doing, what does that mean in practice? That is mind-blowing to think Jesus is the most important person who's ever lived, he's God, all that kind of stuff.

And yet, Jesus says, I'm going to give you my ability, my authority to do even greater things than you've seen me do. We do well not to underestimate the enormity of what this means for us to have Jesus himself through his spirit living in us, working through us.

You know, for me, that's the most amazing, sort of humbling, inspiring truth truth of all. It's a truth which enables us to see the Bible and to see this life as Jesus did, as a gift from God by which we come to see his truth unfolding, his glory in action, and his kingdom coming.

[26 : 27] And the commission which Jesus gives to us is that filled with his spirit, grounded in his love, authorized by him to go, and enlivened by this God-breathed book we call the Bible.

We get to share Jesus himself with those around us. We become part of God's ongoing story. Our God-breathed lives become, if you like, the continuation of Scripture.

There's one final verse, one which may not always have clocked, which Paul says in 2 Corinthians, he puts it this way, you yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts to be known and read by all, and you show that you are a letter of Christ, written not with ink, but with the spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts.

How good is that? How awesome is that? We are called not just to read the Bible, but in some ways to be the Bible.

We are the book other people read and through whom people encounter God because he gives us his presence and his authority. And so, may our lives reflect what it means to live as wise, inspired, diverse, progressive, authoritative people created by the Father, loved by the Son, and filled by the Spirit.

[28 : 18] Amen.