

Sermon Transcript from January 10th, 2016 The Problem with the Bible Pastor John Mark Comer, Bridgetown Church

We have a problem with the Bible. Can I say that? Is that okay to say in church? Can I call out the element in the room? We have a problem. A lot of us in the room tonight don't really read the Bible, in all honesty. If I were to take a poll tonight and ask how many of you read the Scriptures every single day, even if it's just for 15 or 20 minutes, every day, my guess is the number would be really low.

If I were to ask the follow-up question: how many of you have read through the entire Bible from cover to cover, my guess is that number would be even lower. Which is crazy to base your life, for the most part, off a book you've never really read before, at least not all the way.

The reality is that the Bible is the best selling book of all time. Every year over year it sells something like 25 million copies. But, one writer recently called it the best selling book never read. It comes in leather, which is pretty rad. Like, who does that anymore? But, we as a generation, in all honest, we really don't read it anymore. We listen to teaching on the Bible at church or we listen to a podcast on the Bible for extra credit or something on a morning run. Or maybe you read a devotional with a verse from the Bible at the top, one or two, and then a page from Jesus Calling or whatever. Or you subscribe to a daily email devotional with a verse or two or three. But, we don't actually read the Bible anymore.

For a lot of people, their relationship with the Bible looks something like this. Or this. Now, there's nothing wrong with an Instagram photo of the Bible or a tweet of the Bible. That's actually fantastic. The problem is, for a lot of people, this is how they experience the Bible. I don't think that's exactly all that God had in mind.

So, we don't read the Bible. But then, on top of that, a lot of us don't really know how to read the Bible. I mean, let's shoot straight: it is complex and dense, hard to wrap your head around. This is not young adult fiction, okay? This is not *The Hunger Games*. This is not an easy read. It's an ancient library, 66 different books, very different in genre, style, tone and even theology at times. It's written in Hebrew and Aramaic and Greek two to three millennia ago in the Middle East and Africa.

When you open your Bible, you step into a strange and alien world. A lot of us just, in all honest, don't know how to read the Bible. And then there's an even deeper issue. Some of us know how to read the Bible. That's not the problem. It's that we don't actually like the Bible. For starters, it's weird. On page three there's a talking snake. That's weird, guys. That's bizarre. And, a lot of it is boring. Have you ever read Leviticus? Anybody read Leviticus this morning for fun? Yeah, not one. None of you in what 600 people here? Not one of you.

There's a reason for that. It's tedious. Law after law. My guess is that if I were to have coffee with you and I were to ask you, "Hey, tell me honestly, like, straight up. This is a safe place. I know I'm a pastor and stuff. But, this is a safe place. Tell me how you feel about the Bible."

I know that a number of you would say, "Ah, man. I love the Bible. Not in a weird like, worship the Bible kind of way. In a healthy way I love the Bible. I read it every single day. It's a vital part of my discipleship to Jesus."

But, I have come to realize over the last two or three years as a pastor, in conversation after conversation over coffee with a lot of you and then, as a part of a missional community with a ton of great people, I've come to realize that you would be a dinky minority. That most of you, my guess is if you were to actually shoot straight with me, would say, "You know, I don't really like the Bible. I like that you like the Bible. I like that you read it and you study it and you go to seminary and you nerd out. And I like the 40-minute TED Talk thing on the Bible on Sunday nights. That's kind of cool. But, I don't actually like – I mean, it's not really my thing."

And then there's an even deeper issue: a lot of us take issue with the Bible. There has been a tectonic shift from my parent's generation to my own. My dad could read the story of Jericho in Joshua 3 about Joshua and Israel marching around the city for seven days and think, "God is with me. I'm not alone. Have faith in God. Keep at it."

I read that exact same story and I think, "This is genocide. This is ethnic cleansing in the name of God. God commands the extinction of women and children and it feels like it's based on ethnicity. How in the world do I – this is the God I worship? How in the world do I square this with Jesus and His commands on non-violence and enemy love?"

And then the Bible is full of so much that is good and beautiful and true and poetry and prophecy and it's subversive to the status quo. I mean, there's a reason that it's illegal in countries all over the world. There's a reason that people risk life and limb to smuggle it over border after border. People are more than willing to die to get the Bible out there, because it is mind-blowing. It has shaped Western civilization, all the good parts of it, from the ground up.

But, at the same time, it's also full of a lot of gnarly stuff. Polygamy, incest, rape, sexism and racism, war and violence and revenge. All sorts of really nasty stuff. And it's not just that this stuff is in the Bible. Well, sure. Lots of stuff is in the Bible. Most of it's a story. It's that it's in the people of God in the Bible. Right now, hopefully, you're reading Genesis. Abraham is kind of the hero of Genesis. Amazing man of faith. He's also a polygamist and a misogynist and an absentee father.

Later in the year, if you make it past Leviticus, you'll get to King David. Amazing guy. Man of God. Poet. And a violent war criminal and an adulterer and a murderer. He's the hero. The great-great-great-grandfather of Jesus the Messiah. All sorts of crazy stuff in the Bible. And then there's all sorts of questions. What about the fact that the New Testament seems to quote the Old Testament in ways that are really weird and feel like it's out of context? What about the fact that it seems like the Bible is full of contradictions and even errors? Why is it that there are so many different interpretations of the Bible? Some people read the Bible and think that all of the manifestations of the Holy Spirit are for here and now. Prophecy and healing and miracles. That's what we very much believe here at Bridgetown and live into.

But then other people read it and think, "No, that's 1 Corinthians 13 and, actually, that was then and this is now. Now we have the Bible. We don't..."

Wait, what? Some people read the Bible and think that God is in control of everything that happens and drop language like, "I believe God is sovereign." But then other people read the exact same Bible and think, "Whoa, that's not true. Human beings have free will and autonomy and responsibility for good or for evil and the future is not set in stone. It's open and permeable and..."

Well, who's right and who's wrong? It's the exact same Bible. Which brings up another question: what about all of the horrible things done in the name of the Bible? The Africa American slave trade of two centuries ago that we are still reeling from? The genocide of Native Americans? British and French and Dutch imperialism all over Africa? In today's world, the redefinition of marriage in sexuality to line up with the LGBTQ movement? Or parents who don't take their child to the doctor because of a weird reading of James 5? Or people in Alabama – God bless Alabama – who handle snakes every Sunday because of Mark 16? Or fundamentalist polygamist Mormons in eastern Oregon who take wife number two, wife number three, wife number four, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen years old because it's in the Bible?

A lot of crazy stuff has been done in the name of "the Bible says."

One Jewish professor, speaking of the very different way that Jews read the Old Testament from Christians, said this:

"You Christians see the Bible as a message to be proclaimed. We Jews see it as a problem to be solved."

But, in fact, a growing number of Christians – in particular, young, educated, urban or metropolitan Christians – are starting to see the Bible in the same way: as a problem. More of a liability than an asset. A lot of people are asking, "Is the Bible even good for us anymore? Do we really need it or is it best to just cut ties and move on? Keep Jesus, but ditch the Bible."

So tonight, to start off the year, I just want to ask one simple question: why? Why the Bible? Why read it? Why study it? Why believe it and trust it? Why live into it? Why? Why the Year of Biblical Literacy? Why set aside an entire year as a community to read and study through the Bible?

Well, the short answer is: because we are followers of Jesus. All sorts of other reasons, but that is head and shoulders at the top of the pile. We are followers of Jesus. And, if you know anything about Jesus, you know that Jesus was obsessed with the Bible. Like, to put it lightly, He was obsessed. He would read it, He would quote it, He would teach it, He would preach it, He would put it to memory, He would trust it, He would come under its authority, He would pray it, He would live it.

The odds are that Jesus had the entire Bible of His day – what we now call the Old Testament – in memory. Genesis to Malachi, quote any time of day. He was obsessed with this ancient library. After all, Jesus was a rabbi. That word "rabbi" is a Hebrew word meaning "teacher" of what? A teacher of the Bible. A rabbi was a professional Bible teacher.

In hindsight, we now know that Jesus was more than just a rabbi. He was also the Messiah of Israel and the world and He was the Lord. Absolutely. But, don't forget – and it's easy to forget – that Jesus, first and foremost, His job was a rabbi or a Bible teacher. And, as followers of Jesus, as we apprentice to Jesus of Nazareth, our end goal is to have the same kind of relationship with the Bible that Jesus had. That's the end goal.

So, tonight I want to show you a glimpse really fast of Jesus' relationship to the Bible. We'll start off right here in Matthew 5. This is the first biography of Jesus of Nazareth in the New Testament. Matthew 5, 6 and 7, which we now call the Sermon on the Mount, are kind of Matthews collection of the most important teachings of Jesus. Listen to this towards the beginning.

Matthew 5:17. This is Jesus: **"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets."**

That was a very first century, Jewish way of saying "the Bible of the day" or "the Old Testament."

Don't think that I have come to abolish or move on from, or ditch, or throw away the Bible.

"I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law [the Bible] until everything is accomplished. Therefore, anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

Notice three things. A ton I could say, don't have time for it. Notice three things tonight about Jesus' view of the Bible. First off, to Jesus, the Bible is a story that reaches its climax in His life. If you pay close attention to that language, you notice there's an odd word or two. "I have not come to abolish, instead I have come to fulfill the Scriptures."

And then later he writes, "Until everything is..." – what? – "...accomplished." That's fascinating language. To Jesus, He read the Scriptures, not an encyclopedia of truth, which is how a lot of people, particularly in the United States, read the Bible. Not as an encyclopedia of truth, as a scientific textbook that we data-mine for truth about God and Jesus and life after death or whatever.

There is truth all over it, for sure. But, first and foremost, Jesus read this library as a story. A long, drawn out narrative about God and human history, where it comes from and where it's all going. And it's a story, in Jesus' mind, that all builds up to Him. To His coming, His birth, His life, His teaching, His miracles, His kingdom work, His death, His burial, His resurrection and then, after that, the Holy Spirit.

So, for Jesus, the Bible is a story that reaches its climax in Him.

Secondly, to Jesus, the Bible is trustworthy. He says, **"Truly I tell you,"** – that's Jesus for "this is really it." – **"...until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter,"** – in Greek it's "not the iota", which is, quite literally, the smallest letter in the Greek alphabet – **"not the least stroke of a pen,"** – in Greek, it's a word for this minute dot that is smaller than the dot over the 'i' in the English language that was used not even as part of a letter. It was used to help with pronunciation of Greek writing for reading. Not that. Every scrap of ink is the idea here. Not one will ever pass away.

Well, that is about as high a view of the Bible as you can ever have. The Bible has really come under fire in the last century or two. We'll talk about that a ton in the coming year.

Really it's more a way of reading the Bible that has come under fire. But, when Jesus was stuck with a question about the Bible or an accusation against the Bible, nine times out of ten, Jesus would never, ever rail on the Bible. His beef was usually with somebody's misreading of it.

For Jesus, the problem wasn't the Bible, it was the way you read it or you don't believe it or you misinterpret it or you have this weird bias or whatever the case may be. To Jesus, no, the Bible is trustworthy.

And third, to Jesus, the Bible is authority.

I love that line in Matthew 5:19, **"Anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands..."** – anything in here – **"...and teaches others accordingly..."**

"Hey, that's not really a big deal."

"...will be called least in the kingdom of heaven."

That phrase "sets aside" can be translated "break" or "ignore" or "relax." So, if you break the commands in the Bible like, "Hey, it's okay. That's radically out of step. Like, this is 2016. Come on. Get your laws off my body or whatever."

Or if you ignore it like, "Yeah, I know it's in there. But, eh. Whatever." Or if you kind of relax it like, "Yeah, I know. But, boys will be boys or whatever." Man, you will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. In Jesus' view, we are to come under the authority of the Bible. I'll talk about this in a few minutes. To understand the Bible means, quite literally, to stand under the Bible. But, before you freak out, Jesus was no close-minded, dogmatic fundamentalist. Not at all.

In fact, skip down to Matthew 5:21. Let's keep reading.

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago," – quote of the Bible – **"You shall not murder, and..."** – interpretation of the Bible – **"...anyone who murders will be subject to judgment." But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment."**

Skip down to Matthew 5:27: **"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'"** – end quote from the Bible – **"But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."**

Skip down to Matthew 5:33: **"Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago,"** – quote from the Bible – **"Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the oaths you have made.' But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all."**

Skip down to Matthew 5:38: **"You have heard that it was said,"** – quote from the Bible – **"Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also."**

Matthew 5:43: **"You have heard that it was said,"** – quote from the Bible – **"Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."**

Now, Jesus goes on. What's happening here? This is Jesus calling out all sorts of popular readings and misreadings of the Bible in His first century, Jewish world. Stuff on marriage, stuff on divorce, stuff on sexuality, stuff on military violence. Here's what you need to see: to Jesus, the Bible is in constant need of debate and dialogue and reading and rereading and rethinking from the ground up in order to get back to the heart of the text.

The fundamentalist bumper sticker, "the Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it," in my opinion, would not fly with Jesus. Because what is that philosophy – and that's what it really is – missing? The Bible says it, I interpret it. That just doesn't really fly on the bumper sticker. Right? But, freshman level hermeneutics, if you go to Multnomah or you read a 200-page book on hermeneutics – if you're new to that word, it's the art and science of reading the Bible well. Okay?

So, one of the first things you learn in hermeneutics is there are basically three steps to Bible study: revelation, interpretation, application.

Revelation: what does that text say? Interpretation: what does the text mean? Application: how do we live the text out? Now, fundamentalist readings of the Bible blur the lines between revelation and interpretation. So, if you get into a conversation with a fundamentalist, let's just say, hypothetical situation, that you have a number of them in your extended family. Not me. You. And let's just say that every Thanksgiving you dread it because you're just waiting for the dude person to walk over, start the conversation and, let's just say that last Thanksgiving there was a tract from 1973 that was put in your lap.

Let's just say that's your reality, okay? And that if you're not reading the King James, you're in sin. Let's just say that's your reality. Okay? Not me. This is you. Alright? What the fundamentalist – let's say you get into a debate about whatever. The age of the Earth. Okay? How to read Genesis 1. The fundamentalist will say something like, "Well, the Bible says, quote, and I believe the Bible."

Have you ever sat there and thought to yourself, "Well, I believe the Bible too? But, I don't think that's what it means."

But a fundamentalist cannot, or worse, will not, distinguish between revelation and interpretation, between what the text says and his or her reading of the text. Not Jesus. Jesus is not a fundamentalist. He gets that it takes intelligence to read the Bible well. We all know this, right? Now, that does not mean – you don't need a PhD, you don't need a seminary degree, you don't need four hours in Greek and Hebrew every single morning to read the Bible well at all.

But, you do need the skill and the acumen and a little bit of experience to know how to read the Bible well. The Bible has been used for some of the greatest good in human history and it has been abused for some of the greatest evil.

Mark Twain said the Bible is both the poison and the cure. It has been the justification for slavery, but it was also the – without a doubt – driving force behind the movement in both 18th century London, England with Wilberforce and other followers of Jesus and then, a century later, here in the North of America for abolition to end slavery. It was all because of the Bible. It has been used time and time again as a legitimate excuse for war, because there was lots of war in the Bible.

But yet, there's no doubt it was the Bible that was the driving force for Nelson Mandela, Dr. Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu and even Gandhi, who wasn't even a follower of Jesus, to work for peace and reconciliation. The fact is, in the wrong hands, the Bible is dangerous.

Eugene Peterson has a great little book out on the Bible. We have it for sale over at the annex. And he has this great analogy of how giving the Bible to some people is kind of like giving keys to an adolescent to the family car. Like, you have to be careful. It can be dangerous. Peter writes about how some people "twist the scriptures to their own destruction."

So, for Jesus, the Bible, it's not something for the professionals and the professionals only. No. But it is something that we need to wrestle with, and constantly wrestle with and read and reread and debate and rethink, generation after generation after generation with humility and wisdom and skill and intelligence and an open mind and an eye to Church history. We have to come at it like that.

Now, we see why over in Mark 12. Stay with me. Turn to the right to the next biography over. Mark 12. This is a fascinating story about Jesus and the Bible. Mark 12. If you pick up in verse 35.

"While Jesus was teaching in the temple courts," – so, as far as we can tell, teaching the Bible in the temple courts – **"he asked, 'Why do the teachers of the law'"** – or the professional Bible teachers of the day – **"say that the Messiah is the son of the descendant of David? David himself,"** – listen to this – **"speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared:"**

And then here's a quote from Psalm 110. The middle of the Bible.

**"The Lord said to my Lord:
"Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet."**

Now, Jesus goes on to interpret that. We don't need to get into all of it tonight. All I want you to see is Jesus' quote of Psalm 110. Notice Jesus' setup: "David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared."

Listen: to Jesus, the Bible is a divine and a human word. We'll talk about this next week and the week after and the week after and the week after and the week after and all year long this idea that the Bible is a divine and human word.

Here's the short version to whet your appetite: we live in the wake of the conservative/liberal divide of a century or two ago and we're still stuck – and particularly in the US. This a particular American issue and problem. We're still stuck in this either/or, us versus them way of thinking about the Bible. As a general rule, conservatives emphasize the divine side of the Bible. So, the conservatives emphasize this fact that the Bible is Scripture. It's the Word of God.

2 Timothy 3:16 is the all-time favorite verse of conservatives. **"All Scripture is God-breathed."**

Beautiful Scripture. Whereas liberals or progressives, who obviously are all over a city like Portland, emphasis the human side of the Bible. So, to a progressive, you view the Bible more as literature; as man's thoughts from a very long time ago about God and man and life and it's poetic and it's beautiful and most of it is outdated and radically out of step with the modern world.

Now, the two sides kind of lob grenades back and forth at each other, but this either/or way of thinking is so off. To Jesus, there is no doubt it is a both/and. David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, said. To Jesus, the Bible is divine. Speaking by the Holy Spirit. It's God-breathed. And it's human. David wrote that. Paul wrote that. Moses wrote that. This is not a dirty little secret. Sometimes it feels that way if you grow up in a conservative church. This is not a dirty little secret that you need to sweep under the rug. The Bible is not hiding the fact that it has human fingerprints all over it.

Paul, to the church in Corinth. Paul: "I don't really know that Jesus thinks about this, but here's my opinion." That's is a summary of 1 Corinthians 7. Like, the Bible is not hiding. The Bible is not scared to open up and say, "Oh, yeah. I was inspired by the Holy Spirit and this is the work of David or Heman the Ezrahite or the sons of Korah or Paul or Peter or John or Jude or whoever."

It's not a secret, much less a dirty little one at all. It is a human – it's written by men and maybe even women. And it was, at the same time, inspired by God. It is Scripture. It is. That word means a sacred writing. You're not just reading the Odyssey or the Iliad or The Hunger Games. You're reading Scripture. It's sacred. But, it's also literature. It's a poem, a biography, a genealogical record, census data, an ancient myth, a parable, an allegory, a letter. It's Scripture and it's literature. It's divine and it's human.

David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, said. And these two things are not at odds with each other. But, they are in tension. There's no way around that. They are in tension. And I believe that, as followers of Jesus, we have to live in that tension. Jesus got a lot of flack for His reading of the Bible from both the left and the right of His day. From the Pharisees, who were the closest thing in His world to kind of the conservatives, and from the Sadducees, who were the closest thing in the ancient world to what we would think of as a progressive or a liberal. Both had issue with Jesus' way of reading the Bible. My guess is that we will get a little bit of flack in the coming year because we read the Bible too conservative or not conservative enough or whatever. But, this is what it means – I believe – to read the Bible like Jesus.

One more before we move on. Just rewind a paragraph or two. There's one more thing I want you to see. Why this matters so much.

Mark 12:18, **"Then the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection,"** – okay, so that was a theological viewpoint. They did not believe in the resurrection – **"came to him with a question. 'Teacher,' he said, 'Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother.'"**

This is actually a beautiful command that was all about care and preservation of women. It was actually really a beautiful thing. Very long time ago, thankfully. That would be really weird now.

"Now there were seven brothers. The first..." – have you ever read this story? "The first one married and died without leaving any children. The second one married the widow, but he also died, leaving no child. It was the same with the third. In fact, none of the seven left any children at all."

Okay. You would think that by about brother number four they would figure out something's not right here.

"Last of all, the woman died too."

So, this is just the weirdest, kinky, hypothetical situation.

Mark 12:23, "At the resurrection, whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?"

Okay. This is not a theological issue today. So, we read this and think who cares? Okay? All I want you to see tonight is Jesus – there's actually a beautiful back story. But, all I want you to see is Jesus' answer.

Mark 12:24, "Jesus replied, 'Are you not in error...' – you're wrong – "...because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God? When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. Now about the dead rising – have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the account of the burning bush," – this, by the way, is like Biblical kung-fu right here. Jesus is so dang smart. The Sadducees only believed in the Torah and the first five books of the Bible, not in the Prophets. So, to a Sadducee, only the first five books, the books of Moses, were authoritative and not the other ones. So, Jesus makes a case for resurrection out of the first five. It's just brilliant.

"how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'?"

That's a quote from Exodus 3.

"He is not the God of the dead, but of the living."

And then listen to that line: "You are badly mistaken!"

To Jesus, a lot of people are "in error" because "you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God." Maybe because you've never read the Scriptures, maybe because you don't know how, maybe because you've read it, but you've read it wrong or with bias. Maybe because you've read it with no faith and you don't actually believe it. But, for whatever reason, Jesus says to this group of men and woman, who were not illiterate of the Bible as most people in our generation and our day and time are, he says, "You are badly mistaken. You are way off."

I can't help but wonder, particularly now in our generation, how much error, how much bad thinking and, even worse, living comes out of our illiteracy of the Bible because we do not know Scriptures and we don't know the power of God. We don't actually believe what it is that we read in the Bible.

This is what we want to change – one of many things – in the coming year. Now, there's a ton more that we will say over the next year about Jesus and His view of the Bible. But, just to recap for tonight, to Jesus, who was a rabbi, who was a teacher, the Scriptures are a story that all builds up to His life and are trustworthy. Not one dot, not the smallest letter. And the Scriptures are authority. We live under the authority of the Bible. But, at the same time, the Scriptures are in constant need of debate and dialogue and an open mind. Let's read that and reread it, generation to generation. Because the Scriptures are a divine and a human word. Scripture and literature.

And, because of all of that, knowing the Bible and believing the Bible are essential to live well. So, this whole "reading the Bible" thing is, at its core, about following Jesus. Now, hear me out: we follow the Bible because we follow Jesus, and not the other way around.

Andrew Wilson, British writer in his fantastic little one-sitting read on the Bible called "Unbreakable," – it's out at the book table – he writes this:

"Our trust in the Bible stems from our trust in Jesus Christ. I don't believe in Jesus because I trust the Bible, I trust the Bible because I trust in Jesus. I love Him and I've decided to follow Him. So, if He talks and acts as if the Bible is trustworthy, authoritative,

good, helpful and powerful, I will too. Even if some of my questions remain unanswered or my answers remain unpopular."

If you grew up in the Church, the odds are you don't realize how odd it is to base your life off an ancient library of books. That's weird. That's really weird. But, we don't – I love Wilson's point. We don't believe the Bible is Scripture because the Bible says it's Scripture. That doesn't make any sense. All sorts of writings make that claim. The Quran makes that claim, the Book of Mormon, the Bhagavad Gita. We believe the Bible is Scripture because we believe in Jesus and Jesus said that the Bible was Scripture.

That's why we follow Jesus into relationship with the Bible and that is why we come under the authority of all things of the Bible, the ancient library of writings.

One last passage. Turn back to the Gospel of Matthew, just a page or two to the left to Matthew 28. I want you to read here the closing scene in Matthews's biography. This is the closing scene. Last thing. Jesus is literally up on a mountain.

Matthew 28:16: "Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted."

I love the openness and honesty in the Bible.

Matthew 28:18: **"Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to...' – who? – "...me."**

That, by the way, is how you say Jesus is Lord in the first person. And this is what we believe. As followers of Jesus, we believe that Jesus was a rabbi; a brilliant, evocative, Jewish peasant teacher. But, we also believe He was way more than that. He was the Messiah, for sure, of Israel, and He was the Lord. He was and is the ultimate power in the Universe. The embodiment, the in-flesh-and-blooding, of the God who made everything. And, because of that, we believe that all authority in heaven and on earth – that just about covers it – is vested in who? In who? It's not a trick question. Jesus.

Notice: not the Bible. Jesus' closing line is not, "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to the Bible, so read it a lot." That's not what He says. He says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."

Jesus is our authority. He's our boss, for lack of a better word. Make sure you get that. But, here's the follow-up: Jesus, as you go on and read the story, has made the decision to mediate His authority through the Scriptures. I repeat: Jesus is the authority, but He has made the decision to mediate His authority through the Scriptures.

Now, if that sounds weird, this is totally normal. This is how human society works. Almost all authority is mediated through speaking and/or writing, which is speaking on paper. When your boss sends you an email saying, "Do this, that or the other," you obey the email because it's from who? Your boss. When your wife sends you a text, "Hey, on the way home, will you pick up wine or whatever," you obey the text, because it's from your boss... wife, I mean. Okay?

All authority is mediated through speaking and writing. This is true for the US government, the Constitution, law, this is true for the city of Portland, a speed limit sign. This is true for PSU or your college or your university. This is true for your job. This is true for your gym. All authority is mediated through speaking and writing. This is how human society works. Jesus' authority is no different.

Now, scholars, to nerd-out on you for a minute or two – and stay with me. Scholars talk about how the Scriptures are covenant documents, meaning they are documents, or writings – a book, a poem, a letter – for people – listen – who enter into covenant (or into relationship) with Jesus. That means the Bible is not for everybody, it's for people in covenant with God or with Jesus. This is very important to wrap your head around. This is where the religious right gets it wrong. You can't just stand up in Washington DC or on Fox News and say – whatever the conversation is about. Gay marriage or gun control or whatever. You can't just stand up and say, "Well, the Bible says."

Well, yes, the Bible says. And maybe even your reading of the Bible is right and true, but the Bible is not authoritative for the United States of America. It's true, but it's not the authority. It's authoritative for followers of Jesus. The Bible is not the authority for my agnostic, semi-Buddhist, intellectual friend or for my gay neighbor. It's true for them. In its pages we read the best true way to be human, for sure. But, it's not the authority. It's my authority. Why?

Because I'm a follower of Jesus and it's His covenant documents and I, of my own free will and volition, have made the decision to go into the waters of baptism, to come out the other side. I claim that I believe that Jesus was not just a rabbi, but He was the Lord of all creation. I claim that I follow Jesus, that He is my rabbi, I am the apprentice, I live under the authority of Jesus. So, that is mediated through the Bible that I have and read every single day.

So, I live the Bible, I believe the Bible, I trust the Bible, I obey the Bible because I'm a follower of Jesus and these are the covenant documents for how I enter into relationship with Jesus. Which means what? Which means – this is what it all comes down to – to obey the Bible is to obey Jesus and, on the flip side, to disobey the Bible is to disobey Jesus.

When we obey the Bible that is an expression of our faith in Jesus, our trust, our obedience. And, when we disobey the Bible or explain it away or ignore it or shrug it off, that is an expression, as well, of our lack of faith in Jesus or our lack of trust in Jesus and His take on whatever and our disobedience of Jesus. One of the things that we'll talk about a ton in the coming year, because it is such a thorny issue, is the issue of Biblical authority.

So, most of you know this: we are living, right now, in a generation-wide crisis of Biblical authority. In the West, authority used to be vested in the Bible and tradition. So, 500 years ago, the authority figure in society was the Bible and the priest. The Bible says or the priest says. Then, after the enlightenment, all of that changed and authority was then vested in science and an education. So, the authority figure became the scientific study.

"Well, there's a new test on genetics or this that or the other and it says..." – end of story.

Or the professor. "Professor so and so, he has a PhD and therefore he's right."

There's still a hangover of that in the world we live in now. But now, we've moved past that into this brand new world of post-modernity into a post-Christian, post-secular, post-everything world. And now sociologists write a lot about how authority has come to be vested in what sociologists call "the autonomous self." So now, the authority figure is you and, if you want it, your therapist. Which is why so many of your friends justify behavior by saying, "Well, my therapist says." End of story.

Fifty years ago you'd say, "Well, a professor says," or, "This scientific study says. End of story." Five hundred years ago you'd say, "Well, the priest says. End of story." Now it's, "Eh, I don't know if I feel like that. I don't know if I think that's true." Or, "My therapist says. End of story."

Now, all of this tectonic shift in where authority is vested in Western European culture, has done a number to our relationship with the Bible. Because, as a general rule, most of us live as if we are the authority. So, this idea to come under – not only in Jesus, in general. That's weird enough. But then to come under this ancient library of writings, some of which are really hard to even understand? That is a bizarre, new, strange idea to a lot of people even here in the room tonight.

But, all of the debate, all of the controversy, all of the anger and back and forth, all of the acrimony about whatever issue – gay marriage or divorce or gun control or whatever. At the end of the day, when you pay close attention, it is debate about the authority of the Bible. Is the Bible authoritative or is it not? That is the crux, that is the question. All the other questions are secondary. The role of men and women in church? It's all second. Is the Bible authoritative or not?

But, here's the thing: I would love to just stand up here and say, "Yes it is! And, here at Bridgetown Church, we believe that the Bible is authoritative."

Fifty of you leave the church, everybody else [clapping.] But, we all know it's not that simple, right? Because yes, authority is mediated through writing. Yes, the Bible's

authoritative, but this isn't a stop sign. So, authority mediated through the city of Portland to you and me, speed limit: 35 miles per hour. If you drive past that at 45 miles per hour and a cop pulls you over, "I'm sorry, you were driving 45. The speed limit, that sign, did you see it?"

"Yeah, it's 35."

You don't fire off, "Well, you know, that's your interpretation, Officer. I went to PSU. Do you know what post-modernity is? It's kind of all a little bit subjective and, actually, if you know the Latin root to the word 'limit' is this thing and, actually, it's more about borders and how borders expand. It's far more flexible than you would imagine. Come on. Nobody actually drives 35 miles per hour anymore. I mean, come on. Get with it. You know?"

"That doesn't fly. Three hundred and fifty dollars. Goodbye. End of the story."

And there's a lot in the Bible that is just that clear. "You shall not commit adultery."

"Well, what exactly is adultery? Is it..."

Shut up. Shut up. Alright? That's really clear. But, there's a lot in the Bible that's not clear. We'll talk about all of this in the coming year. For example: most of the Bible is a story. The vast majority, well over 50% of the Bible, is narrative. The Bible is authority? Oh... okay? In what way is a story about Joshua marching around Jericho for seven days and then killing women and children and men authoritative over my life? In what sense is a story about a dude having sex with his daughter-in-law and then wanting to burn her alive – that's at the end of Genesis. You have that to look forward to next week. How is that authoritative over my life?

And then there are all sorts of commands in the Bible that are universal commands, for all people for all time. For example: Jesus said, "A new commandment I give you: love one another."

That's for everybody. Jewish, Gentile, 21st century, 1st century. But then a lot of commands in the Bible are local commands. Like when Jesus tells James and John to go into the village Bethphage and get a donkey. So, when you read that passage – we'll get there in August – you don't need to go get on a plane and fly over to Israel and walk to the village and rent a donkey. And you don't need to feel guilty for not doing that. You know what I mean? When you read your Bible that morning, you just don't need to feel like, "Oh, God. I'm sorry. I know I should really go rent this donkey for you, but I just, it's finals week and I'm so sorry. You know? I'll take communion twice Sunday."

That's a local command. Okay? That's easy. But, here's the thing: there are a number of commands in the Bible where it's not really easy to figure out if it's universal or local. What about Genesis 1:28? **"Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it."**

What about that one? Are you all supposed to get married? Some of you are like, "Yes, please." Others of you are like, "No!"

Are you all supposed to have kids? And, if so, by the way, it says "multiply." Like, two kids isn't enough. That's addition, not multiplication. Okay? You don't even start to obey that command until number three. So, I'm in it. We're all done. You young couples are like, "Come on, man. It's in the Bible."

Yeah, but what about the fact that now we have seven plus billion people on the planet? What about the fact that food is actually an issue and global warming and famine is now a huge issue? Water is a huge issue. Have we actually done that command? Is it like checked off the list? And now is there actually a moral imperative to have less kids?

"Yeah, but that command isn't in the Bible."

You're right. See? It's not always clear. And then what about the fact that you have hundreds of commands that are in the Torah – we'll talk about this. Six hundred and thirteen, to be exact, in Leviticus, Exodus, Numbers. Well, Paul and the New Testament writers make it crystal clear that we no longer obey those commands as followers of Jesus. So, it's okay if you want to eat bacon. Like, it's weird. It's gross. I'm more on the veggie side. But, if you

want, you're not in sin. Okay? It's okay if right now you're wearing clothing that is made up of cotton and polyester. You don't have to repent tonight. It's okay.

So, okay. That means that actually not all of the Bible is authoritative. Nobody actually believes that. The reality is that parts of the Bible are authoritative for followers of Jesus. Well, which parts? Well, that's pretty easy. The New Testament, right? The teachings of Jesus, the writing of the apostles. For sure. But then you have to talk about the fact that there are a number – it's a short list – of commands in the New Testament where our culture has changed so much that to obey it to the letter of the law would actually kind of miss the point.

Like "greet one another with a holy kiss." There's six of those commands in the New Testament. Well, if I were to do that to Gerald, it means something very different now than it used to. So, what does that mean? Do we just toss it? Like, "Eh, that was for then." Or, do we obey the principle behind it? Like, greet one another with a holy side-hug or a really hardy handshake for my dad's generation? Do we throw it out? And then here's the question: well, if we throw it out, what about the commands in the New Testament on sexuality? Because that is radically out of step with the modern world.

What about the commands of the New Testament on divorce or money or judgment or violence or killing? There's a lot of stuff that's really unpopular in the New Testament. So, it's not all that clear, right? Now, we'll nuance this out all year long. There's no way to cover it on one teaching. I just want to unsettle you tonight. That's all I'm trying to do. We'll nuance this out all year long.

Here's the short version that will take 12 months to flesh out. The short version is: parts of the Bible are authoritative for followers of Jesus. We read the Old Testament as the story of where we come from. It was authoritative. It was a good, beautiful and true thing for a time. And now, as followers of Jesus, we live into the covenant documents that we call the New Testament. That's even the right language for it. The New Testament or the New Covenant. We live into the authority of the teachings of Jesus and the writings of the New Testament authors. And there's a very short list of a couple of commands, a holy kiss, women in head-coverings, women in braided hair. I think it's okay now. I think. I'm not sure. But I think if your hair is braided, sisters, I don't think you need to repent tonight.

It's a very short list of commands where our culture has changed so much that we obey the principle behind the command, but no longer have to exactly flesh it out like that. That's the short version. My point for tonight is just two things. One: that we believe the Scripture is authoritative. But, we have to nuance that out. And two: that living under the authority of the Scriptures, particularly the New Testament, with intelligence and all, yes, this is what it means to follow Jesus.

This is it. This is where the rubber meets the road. This is what it means to follow Jesus. We really need to grapple with this tonight, because what a lot of people want to do with the Bible is pick and choose, right?

So, Thomas Jefferson – this is a very American way of reading the Bible. Thomas Jefferson, most of you know this story, he was a deist, kind of an agnostic of his day. He literally took a pair of scissors and cut up his Bible and cut out everything that he did not believe in or agree with. And he was left with this really thin, edited, mutilated scrapbook of bits and pieces of the Bible that he would read on a regular basis.

Here's what I love about Jefferson: at least he was honest. Because the reality is a ton of you in the room tonight do that, but you're not honest about it. I do that at times and I'm not honest about it. A lot of people pick and choose with the Bible and pick and choose with Jesus. We love Jesus' message on love and social justice and freedom and religious hypocrisy. Stupid religious people. But, we ignore Jesus' teachings on the Bible and how it is Scripture, all of it, and how it's trustworthy, it's authority. We ignore what Jesus has to say about marriage and divorce and sexuality. We ignore what Jesus has to say about money.

This is what conservatives ignore: what Jesus has to say about money and what Jesus has to say about military violence. Whew. You don't talk about that in Bible-believing churches in America, because we don't actually believe the Bible. You can't do that with Jesus or with the Bible or you will end up following not Jesus, but a figment of your imagination. We can't pull a Thomas Jefferson on this library that's open right in front of you.

Again, Andrew Wilson – I love his little book. He writes this:

"Wherever Scripture challenges some of our deeply held beliefs – as it often does – we have a choice. We can challenge the Bible or we can let the Bible challenge us."

We can do a Jefferson on it, cutting out the bits we like and binning the rest, or we can do a Jesus on it, affirming the accuracy of the Bible in spite of the difficulties we have with it and allow it to refine our view of God, the world, sexuality or whatever it may be. Personally, I'd go with Jesus on that one.

And then I love what Ray Lubeck here in town – he's a professor – writes:

"For believers to follow Jesus implies, among other things, adopting the same attitude towards God's Word as Jesus had. Simply put, we cannot truthfully say that we are followers of Jesus if we neglect or refuse to obey what the Bible tells us."

So, because we are followers of Jesus, we are going to take an entire year and read through and study through the Bible. We're calling it, as I said, The Year of Biblical Literacy. We're doing this in partnership with our good friends at Reality San Francisco – one of my best friends is the lead pastor there – as well as with Tim Mackie and the Bible Project here in town, one of the best things Portland has on offer.

There are four layers to the year. First, we want you to read it. So, we actually want you to read the entire Bible from cover to cover. All of it. Leviticus, Jeremiah, Ecclesiastes. So much fun stuff. Hopefully you started on January 1st. If not, you're 10 days behind. Sorry. That's the bad news. But the good news is there's 366 days. It's a leap year. You have an extra day to catch up. So, just read a lot one day this year.

It's like, "That day was a marathon!"

We want you to read. If you're new or you're behind or you read to Genesis 7 and then you already fell off the bandwagon or you're just here, you're new, you're visiting and you're like, "Oh my gosh. I had no idea."

We're 10 days into the year. There's another three hundred – I'm so bad at math – and fifty-six days left. I want you to join in, go home tonight, read a couple of chapters of Genesis. Tomorrow morning, wake up and read thirty chapters of Genesis and then you're ready to roll. Okay? We want you to read it.

Then secondly, we want you to watch it. So, this is so fantastic. The Bible Project – if you don't know about them yet, you will – has done an incredible job in creating a five to ten-minute video overview – it's animated – of every single book in the Bible, as well as about fifteen theme videos for Messiah, heaven on earth, the Law and all sorts of great stuff. So, as you read through the Bible, before you start a new book, there's an app, you can download all of it. You watch this five to ten-minute video and, "Okay, now I have my mind around what it is that I'm about to read."

It's fantastic. It's high-level scholarship, but it has pictures. It's awesome. It's for the YouTube generation. We love it.

Third, we want you to talk about it. So, with your missional community at your weekly meal, there's discussion questions on our website. Tyler and crew put together a fantastic site. They're at Bridgetown.church/bible. Everything is there. Discussion questions for every single month. So, as you share a meal with your community, week after week, we hope that you set aside 20-30 minutes each week to talk through a couple of questions, to read the Scriptures, to hold one another accountable. And then – we'll talk about this next week – to read the Scriptures for formation, not for information. To be shaped into the image of Jesus.

And then finally, we want you to come here on Sunday nights and to listen in. We're doing – the plan was 52, but we lost a week – 51 teachings now from the Bible and on the Bible over the next year. Along the way there will be a number of special guests. We have John Walton coming in, who's amazing. We have Joshua Ryan Butler coming in to teach on genocide and holy war in Joshua and Judges. We have a number of midweek lectures that should be fantastic.

The first one is not this week, but next week. Next Wednesday night, the 20th. Here, Dr. Timothy Mackie, Hebrew professor, brilliant dude and he rides a skateboard. Kind of double-cool. He is going to lecture on Genesis 1, science, faith, evolution, creationism, what does the Bible say? Are faith in Jesus and Genesis 1 and evolution compatible;

incompatible? How do we read Genesis 1? Is this saying the Earth is a couple thousand years old or billions of years old or is it not saying it at all? Is this myth? Is this history? All of that. Fun stuff.

The week after that, Ray Lubeck is going to lecture. He literally – yep, if you're a Multnomah guy or gal. He literally wrote the book on hermeneutics. If you're a freshman at Multnomah, the odds are you're in that class right now. But, if you don't want to take a freshman class or we have a 10-week class or read a 300-page book, just come that Wednesday night. It's an hour-and-a-half-long crash course on hermeneutics. It's like fire hose. Like, "This is how you read the Bible in a night."

So, that's tons of stuff coming in the months ahead. All of you Bible nerds, this is your year, okay? So, all 10 of you will have a great year. Now, a couple of thoughts before we wrap up for the night – and thanks for your patience, I know this is a very long teaching. But, just a couple of nuts and bolts things. First off, get a good Bible if you don't have one. If you don't have money, we have a free one for you in the back. Take it home. Read it. Most of you have an iPhone. You have enough money to buy a Bible. So, get a good Bible. One that you love, that you like. You like how it looks and how it feels. Any translation, for the most part, is great. We're huge fans of the NIV, but the ESV is also well.

For sale out in the Annex, two resources if you want: one is a brand new study Bible from Zondervan on the NIV. And this is the first of its kind. If you know the difference, it's Biblical theology, not systematic theology. And so, basically there's the Bible and then, at the bottom, there's all sorts of commentary and questions and answers and then, throughout the book there's great stuff. In each book, at the beginning, there's all sorts of stuff if you want to study up and research. So, this is if you want to nerd-out or if, as you read, you have questions and you're like, "I don't understand that. I don't understand this." Great resource for you.

And then, if you want to go to the other end of the spectrum – this is actually how I read all of my Old Testament reading. So, I have this beautiful book, handmade in Scotland. I love it. But, I actually read all of my Old Testament in this. It's called "The Books of the Bible."

It's an NIV translation that is single column and there's no chapter numbers, no verse numbers and no subheadings and it's broken up by literary. And so, as you read through it, it's so much easier to read. There's no clutter and it's very kinfolky, kind of. It's fantastic. And, as you read through it, what feels like you read two or three chapters is actually five, six, seven. It's so much easier. And, for those of you that are into design, this is really ugly. But, I have one that's black and it has Helvetica. It's awesome. That's all you need to get. Okay?

Web search for that. So, get a Bible that you love. Secondly, create a daily ritual. I think the morning time is best, but maybe you work early or whatever and you're not a morning person. That's okay, but create a daily ritual where you come before God, Bible open. Put your phone away. We don't need an Instagram of you with your Bible with hashtag "Year of Biblical Literacy." Okay? Maybe one. But that's all you need for the coming year. Okay? Where you take 15 minutes to post a photo, but you don't actually read the Bible.

So, created a daily ritual, come before God, quiet time and place, put away your phone, open up your heart and mind to God.

Third, I would say this: don't add; subtract. Most of you are already over-busy. So, this will take you a while. This will take you a minimum of 20 minutes a day to read 3 or so chapters a day, plus a psalm. That's in the reading plan, which is all up on the site.

Most of you are already over-busy. So, don't just try to cram this in. You need to actually cut something out. So, figure out what takes up 30 or so minutes of your day or an hour, however you want to invest. And figure out what to cut out. Maybe you go to bed an hour earlier, you get up an hour earlier. Maybe just less foosball or whatever your thing is. But figure out what to cut out in order to create space to daily come before God.

And then finally, I would just say to stay with it. A lot of you, most of you, have never read all the way through the Bible before and you'll read it and there'll be moments when you think to yourself, "This is amazing," and other moments when you'll think, "This is why I've never read the Bible all the way through before."

Alright? Maybe because it's boring, in which case keep at it. Seriously. You want to do

this. You want to read all the way through. Maybe because it's hard or it's weird or you don't like it, particularly when you get to, say, Joshua or Judges. And we'll hopefully help you here on the weekend as we teach along with it. But man, sometimes, you know, the best answer is just to keep reading. Just keep reading. Let it speak for itself. We really believe one of the best ways to learn how to read the Bible is to read the Bible.

So, a lot of it will start to make sense as you read through, as you get to Jesus in the Summer, as you get to Paul and Peter and John in the Fall. A lot of it will start to make sense for you. A couple just random things: please don't email me Bible questions. I love you, but I just don't have time. Okay? And secondly, please don't debate the Bible on Facebook. Just stop it. Just, please. It's so dumb. It's so stupid. Just stop. That is like the cesspool of the Kingdom of God. Okay?

And I know that, for a lot of you, this act of coming before God every day and reading all the way through the Bible in a year with your community, I know this is a huge commitment for a lot of you. A lot of you aren't readers, which is totally fine. And, even those of you who are, we don't read the Iliad every night before bed. And so this is a huge step for a lot of you. But, you know what? We're followers of Jesus. That is a huge commitment and this is an essential part of our discipleship to Jesus.

So, please join us. We want to go on this journey together as a community. Not just me and the staff and 100 of you, but all of us, together as a community, reading through the Scriptures. Being shaped as a community into the story of God. We really feel this is the next step forward as a community in our discipleship to Jesus.

You know, in closing, obviously a lot of us in the room tonight don't have the same kind of relationship with the Bible that Jesus had. I get that. No worries. We're all in process. Some of you love it. I love the Bible. Usually I don't want to share out of my weakness and not brag, but I feel like I have a great relationship with the Bible. I love it. I read it every single day. It's usually the highlight of my day. I read it 365 days a year and through at least once. I love it.

But, I have come to realize that a lot of people think I love it because I teach the Bible for a living. Well, sure. That's why I love nerdy scholarship stuff. But, I love the Bible because I'm a follower of Jesus. I had a conversation with a friend of mine from Bridgetown a couple of months ago and, in the conversation, I just said how sad I was that I've come to realize so many people at Bridgetown don't actually read the Bible, much less on a daily basis. And, it was interesting. Good guy. He was immediately all up and defensive and, "Whoa, whoa, whoa."

And he said, "Well, we're not all like you. We're not all Bible nerds. We don't like the Bible. That's your thing."

He was a little nicer than that, but not much. "You're a Bible nerd. We don't actually like the Bible. That's just not how I'm wired," he said. And it was just like a gut bomb to me. Like, "Oh, man. I love you, but you don't get it. You don't get it."

You don't have to be an NBA coach to like and watch and play basketball. You don't have to be the lead singer of Coldplay to listen to music or play guitar. Not that I'm the lead singer. I'm just saying. You don't have to be a professional to really love and do and enjoy something. You don't have to be a pastor or a seminary grad or a PhD or a Bible teacher or even a Bible nerd to love and read and study and live into the Bible. All you have to be is a follower of Jesus. That's it.

And I know a lot of you are not there yet. That's fine. That's what this year is about. To close this gap in our discipleship to Jesus. My prayer for the coming year for you, for me, for our community is that one, you join us in reading through the Scriptures. That you actually make it. And that, through this daily act of coming before Jesus, Bible open, cell phone away, heart and mind open, under the authority of Jesus, that your life is shaped by this story that we're about to read. You meet with God in that time and that place and that you discover life there.

Notice my goal is not that you all learn the Bible in the coming year. Sure, I want that to happen. But, Jesus said, "You search the Scriptures diligently because you think in them you have eternal life." He said that to the Bible nerds of His day.

"But these are they that testify of me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may find life."

So, we step into this strange, alien world of the Bible not just to learn more about God even, we step into this world to find Jesus. That is my prayer for you, for our community and the coming year. Let's stand and pray.