

## Sermon Transcript from January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2016 Shaped Pastor John Mark Comer, Bridgetown Church

Hey. Turn in your Bible's to Paul's second letter to Timothy. It's right there in the New Testament. If you're new to the Bible, feel free – there's a table of contents right at the beginning – to stop by there en route to 2 Timothy 3 and we'll read verse 14 in just a minute. Are you guys doing okay? Are you awake? Are you alive? Yeah? Good week?

I love you guys so much. I was just up here ignoring what Josh was saying and thinking about how much I love you guys. It's okay. I was listening during the five. But, you know. It's pretty simple. I'm not going to Vancouver, so who cares? But, thinking about how much I love you guys. It's such a joy to be a part of this community. I hope you had a good week.

My highlight of the week: my wallet was stolen. Yep. Out of my car. Yep. But, here's the awesome part: so, the thief – this is so awesome – was rummaging around in our car. All he stole was my wallet and my kid's sunglasses. I mean, come on. Who steals kid's sunglasses? They're like bright orange, for one, and they're like this big. But, anyway. He stole that and he dropped his smartphone on the floor of our car. How awesome is that? So, we're working with the police officer right now. It's not locked. It has all his information. And I think we're going to call his mom and ask her – true story – to... yeah. So, I had a great week. I hope you're doing great.

Hey, we are three weeks into what we are calling the Year of Biblical Literacy. We, together, are reading through the entire Bible from Genesis all the way up to Revelation and doing this as a community together. Hopefully you make it all the way and don't drop off next week. And then, on Sundays, we are teaching from the Bible on the Bible. Now, this coming week, we are reading Exodus 22 – that was this morning – through Leviticus 4. So, we get after Leviticus. Are you ready for that? Oh, man. It's bloody. It's violent. It's weird. It's fantastic.

We're also reading Psalms 24-30. And, on the docket for this week is a video from the Bible Project on Leviticus. It's fantastic. I think it's around Thursday or Friday. Also, this coming Wednesday night, we have yet another mid-week lecture. This time with Dr. Ray Lubeck from Multnomah University. Dr. Lubeck literally wrote the book on hermeneutics. If you're thinking, "What is hermeneutics?" it's not a disease. It's actually a word from Bible college or seminary. It's a kind of stuck-up way of saying "the art and science of reading the Bible well."

So, we want you, in the coming year, not only to read through the Bible, but to actually kind of develop the ability and the acumen to read the Bible well. And, the fact is – I hope this doesn't sound condescending at all. I don't mean it that way. But, a lot of followers of Jesus don't really know how to read the Bible, at least not well. So, this is a great way for you to learn. If you don't want to read a 300-page book or take a college-level class, come Wednesday night.

We asked him to, in two hours, give kind of drink-out-of-a-firehose, download, crash-course in hermeneutics. Everything you need to know at a popular level. So, that's Wednesday night, 6:30-8:30 PM. Free of charge. You don't even need to sign up. Just come. See you Wednesday night. And who was here last Wednesday with Tim? How good was that? Seriously. That was... man. He's so much better than me, it's not even fair.

That said, yeah, that's all you need to know.

2 Timothy 3 to start off. Let's read it. Verse 14. You have that open in front of you? Yeah? Okay. Here we go.

**"But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Jesus the Messiah. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."**

Paul writes to this young kid, Timothy, "From infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures."

From a young age, Timothy was Biblically literate. Now fast forward two millennia later. Here we are. Portland, Oregon. 2015. And, even though a lot of us grew up in the church – not everybody here, of course. But a lot of us. Still, I would argue that we are a Biblically illiterate generation. That, as a general rule, we don't really know the Bible, at least not all that well anymore. The hope for the coming year – at least here at Bridgetown – is to change all that.

Now, last week, the question was: what is the Bible? That's kind of the starting line. And we said the Bible is a library of writings that are both divine and human that, together, tell a unified story which leads its reader to Jesus.

So, after that, now we are ready to ask the follow-up question, and that is: what is the Bible for? Meaning, what role does it play in the Kingdom of God? Or, put another way, what exactly, when you pick up your Bible and you open it and you jump in, is it supposed to do in you and me and our community and the city as a whole? Behind that, of course, is the even deeper question: is it really all that important? Does this really matter? I mean, you're about to start Leviticus. Yeah. Good luck. Some of you know what's coming.

Is it really all that important? Does it really matter or not? So, that's what I want to tackle tonight. Now, this is kind of lecture format tonight. There, at a big picture, kind of broad strokes level, when I read through the Scriptures – and I see it even here in Timothy – I see three major reasons for the Bible. So, what is the Bible for? Three thoughts if you're taking notes.

First off: it's to know who God is, who we are and how we relate to each other. The opening line of the Bible is "in the beginning..." – who? – "God." The Bible is first and foremost about who? God. Not about you. Not about me. Not about how to get ahead in life or have a great marriage or start a killer business or even how to go to Heaven when you die. A lot of that stuff is in there. But if the Bible is a story, the protagonist is not Abraham or Moses or John, Mark or you. It's God. God Himself is the center of what this library is all about.

In fact, you can think of the Bible as God's self-disclosure statement. The word used in theology is "divine revelation." That's what the Bible is. Divine revelation. Meaning it's God Himself, through a human writer of course – remember last week – but it's God saying, "This is who I am and this is who I'm not."

And we need this now more than ever because there is so much bad thinking about God. This from Eugene Peterson:

"God and His ways are not what most of us think. Most of what we are told about God and His ways by our friends on the street or read about Him in the papers or view on television or think up on our own is simply wrong. Maybe not dead wrong, but wrong enough to mess up the way we live. And this book, the Bible, is precisely a revelation; a revealing of what we could never figure out on our own."

I love that. What we could never figure out on our own. Now, here is why this matters: A.W. Tozer – anybody read him before? Mid-century prophet. He said that we tend, by a secret law of the soul, to move toward our mental image of God. What he meant by that was we tend to become like who we think God is.

The ISIS terrorist, cutting off the head of the infidel. The prosperity gospel, celebrity preacher, getting out of his Humvee after late night drinks with Kanye West. The Westboro Baptist picketer at the military funeral screaming "God hates fags." The gay singer at the Grammys thanking God for his hit single about a one-night stand. The Catholic nun who gave up her life and marriage and success to live in the slums of India and work with the destitute and the dying. The husband who is faithful to his wife through chronic illness, decade after decade, until death do us part. The business tycoon who, rather than getting sucked into the materialism of our day and age, is known for giving away 90% of his or her income to the Kingdom.

Each one of these men and each one of these women do what they do because of what they believe about God. So clearly, what we believe about God matters. It's not just this abstract idea. It's not heady. Clearly, what we believe about God matters. And this is why the Bible is essential. There's just so much bad thinking out there about God. Not only

out there on the street, but even in here, even in the church, even in your own mind and imagination. There's just so much bad thinking about God.

So, the Bible helps us sort through all the myths and misconceptions and get at who God actually is. In particular, the parts of the Bible about Jesus. Because this is a library about God. But, that said, it's also about us. So, opening line of the Bible? "In the beginning, God." Then, use a paragraph or two later, we read that God created human beings in His own image and in His own likeness.

So, in who God is, we discover who we are. Once again, our culture wants to label you with an identity. You're gay, you're straight, you're transgender, you're republican, you're democrat, you're a hipster, you're a hippie, you're a jock, you're urban, you're suburban, you're blue collar, you're intellectual, you're creative, you're cool, you're uncool. You are whatever.

The Bible is God's way of saying, "No. This is who you are. Made in the image and the likeness of God." As a human being, whether you follow Jesus or not, you have value, worth, beauty. But, read the story. You're also bent out of shape and corrupt and guilty of sin. But still, you are loved by the God who made everything. Deeply loved. That is who you are.

So, the Bible is about who God is and it's about who we are and then – track with me – it's about how we relate to each other. Now, most of the Bible is stories. You're learning that right now as you read it. And, most of the stories are about human beings interacting with God. And here's what happens: a lot of the time, we miss the point of the stories. They don't always have a moral lesson. Right? Are you learning that? Sometimes they do, for sure. But, a lot of the time – we just read Genesis over the last month or so – there is no moral lesson.

This week, at our family meal with my missional community, we were sitting around the table talking about the reading and the first thing anybody said – we were talking about Genesis – was, "Man, there's a lot of sex in Genesis. And a lot of it's like kind of kinky and weird and kind of messed up."

You read it, right? You know. Yeah. It's not like rated G, that's for sure. If it was a movie, my kids would not really watch – I would not watch it, for that matter.

Even the best characters in the Bible are very human. But, these stories aren't necessarily telling us how to live. Often, they are telling us now not to live. Case and point are all the stories about polygamy. It's a great example. There's a lot of polygamy in the Bible, in the Old Testament, that is. But, every single example is negative. You notice that in Genesis? That does not change as you read through. In fact, it gets worse. Every one is a dysfunctional mess. Anger and jealousy and infighting and favoritism and sibling rivalry. I mean, it's like soap opera nasty. I mean, reading Genesis at times is like watching daytime TV.

It's like, "Really, what? But... that's his daughter-in-law. Oh! That's sick!"

Right? If anything, the Bible is God's indictment on polygamy. And here's the beauty of the story of God: still – and you know this – God works through polygamy. So, think of Israel; God's chosen people. We'll talk about that in a minute. Israel, the 12 tribes, come from 12 sons who come from 4 mothers and 1 dad. Jacob, man. That dude had it going on. Four moms, one dad.

Now, that is not a sign of God's blessing on polygamy. Read the story. Joseph, the technicolor, the brothers at each other's throats. I mean, it's a disaster. That is a sign of God's blessing in spite of polygamy; of God's mercy on Jacob and Isaac and Abraham and so on and so forth. My point is this: most of these stories aren't necessarily telling you how to live or even how not to live, but rather – listen – how ordinary, normal, at times incredible and, at other times screwed up, and most of the time a mixture of both, men and women relate to God.

I love this from Dallas Willard:

"The open secret of many Bible-believing churches..." – like us here at Bridgetown – "...is that only a very small percentage of their members study the Bible with even the degree of interest, intelligence or joy that they bring to bear upon their favorite newspaper or magazine."

So, just go on Instagram tonight and count up the number of kinfolk posts compared to Leviticus posts. Like, you know who wins, right?

"In my opinion, based on considerable experience, this is primarily..." – listen – "...because they do not know and are not taught how to understand the experience of the Biblical characters in terms of how they experience life."

Meaning, we read about Abraham in Genesis or Moses in Exodus and we think, "Oh, that was then, this is now. That was great for Abraham. That was great for Moses. But, that's not me. It's not who I am. It's not how I relate to God."

But that is what's going on. The dream is that, as you read the Scriptures, you would immerse your mind's eye and your imagination in the story; that you would become the character that you're reading about, good, bad and ugly, and that you would learn how to, right in the chaos and the mess of life, relate to God.

So, first reason for the Bible is to tell us who God is, who we are and how to relate to each other. You still alive? Yeah? Okay. Keep going.

Second reason is this, if you're taking notes: to tell the real, true story of human history. And, if you want extra credit – actually, there is no extra credit, but let's pretend. If you want it, write down: through the lens of Israel.

As I said last week, most of the Bible is a story. Remember that? That pie graph? Most of the Bible is literally narrative. But, on top of that, most of the library that is Scripture, as a whole, is a story. It's a sprawling, long, complex, drawn out, at times sporadic story. But still, it is one unified story. And it tells the story of human history from the beginning. That's what that word "genesis" means. The beginning all the way through to where we're at today.

Now, it tells this story through the lens of Israel. Not China or Argentina. This isn't a textbook. This isn't history of world civ. Okay? So, it's more like, I don't know, I think A Band of Brothers, which is a story about one group of men inside a much larger story, that of World War II. Right? So, in the same way, this is a story about one nation inside of a much larger story about what God was up to in all the nations.

God was up to all sorts of stuff all over the world that's not in here. But, God was up to something special in Israel. Israel was called "God's chosen people" because it was out of Israel that God would draw out the Messiah who would bring the healing and the renewal of God to all creation, and that's what this story is all about.

Now, here's why this matters. Think with me for a minute. All of us live by a story. What I mean by that is all of us live by some kind of a narrative that makes sense of the questions of life. Who are we? Where do we come from? What is the meaning and purpose of life? And there are all sorts of stories out there. Even in the late-modern, hyper-secular West, there are all sorts of stories. And, if you want to call it worldview, that's fine as well.

Atheism, the most anti-story there is, is still a story. Who are we? Evolved animals. Where do we come from? A glorious accident. What is the meaning and purpose of life? There is none. Life doesn't need a meaning or purpose. It's just what you make of it, because it is. That's a story. That's a framework to make sense of the miracle that is life when you get out of bed in the morning.

The Republican Convention has a story to tell. A narrative about what's right, what's wrong, where the world is going. The Left has a story to tell. Hedonism has a story to tell. Who are we? Portlanders. Where do we come from? Mostly California, but we don't tell people that. What is the meaning and purpose of life? Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow a new bar opens. That's a story. It's how people make sense of life in this city.

Now, all sorts of stories out there. Here's my point: the Bible is an alternative story. It is a story that subverts and upends all the other stories out there. The South American philosopher, Ivan Illich, was once asked, after decades of turmoil and change in South America, "What's the best way to change a society? Is it violent revolution or gradual, incremental reform?"

And his answer was telling. He said, "Neither. If you want to change a society, you have to tell an alternative story."

If you want to change a society, you have to tell an alternative story. That's what the Bible does. It tells an alternative story to capitalism, to socialism, to Buddhism, to Islam, to secularism, to sexual tolerance, to whatever the story it is, and it exposes the weak points in all the other stories that so many of us live by.

My friend Mike Erre has a great little book called "Why the Bible Matters" and in it, he writes this:

"The Bible reveals the world as it really is. It is not primarily a theological textbook, a body of laws and regulations..." – which is how so many people think about the Bible – "...or a collection of nice, moral stories. It is a story that presents a different way of seeing the world and our lives in it."

Now, when I say story, I don't mean "fiction" or "figment of the imagination." I mean it is the real, true story of the world. Lesslie Newbigin, who was a famous missionary to India – maybe you recognize that name, maybe not. He has a great book and in it he writes about his Hindu intellectual friend and a conversation they had about the Bible. And his Hindu friend said this:

"I can't understand why you missionaries present the Bible to us in India as a book of religion. It is not a book of religion. And anyway, we have plenty of books on religion in India. We don't need anymore. I find your Bible a unique interpretation of universal history. The history of the whole creation and the history of the human race and, therefore, a unique interpretation of the human person as a responsible actor in history. This is unique. There is nothing else in the whole religious literature of the world to put alongside it."

And he's right. If you've ever read the Quran or the Book of Mormon or the Bhagavad Gita, if you've ever read that stuff you know that the Bible, for all of its problems and issues, it stands apart. There is nothing like it in all of the religious literature in the world.

This is why reading the Bible is an exercise of the imagination. What I mean by that is, as you open up your Bible in the morning or at night or whatever your routine is, and as you start to read, you step into a whole new world. In particular, when you come out of the secularism of the late-modern West. You step into a whole new world where God is not only real, but wow, God is close and involved, authority, power to step in. A world where virgins give birth to the Messiah, where death does not have the last word, where evil is real and personified and at work in the world, but where one day you know God will bring all things to rights.

It's a whole other world than the one that you and I are used to. It's an exercise in the imagination. You rethink reality from the ground up. But listen, it's also an exercise in participation. What I mean by that is it's the kind of story that you join in and, hopefully in time, you carry forward. So, I just want to restate: most of the Bible does not tell you what to do. A lot of it does, in particular the New Testament. A lot of it tells you what not to do. Some of it tells you what to think or what to feel or what to believe. But, most of it just tells you stories about a man, a woman who can't give birth, another woman who can't stop giving birth, how they don't like each other. Whatever it's about.

And here's the thing. This is what a really good story does: a really good story does something to you where you want to join in. Star Wars, anybody? Like, find me a 10-year-old boy who doesn't want to be a Jedi knight. They don't exist. Or, if they do, shame on you, mom. Shame on you, dad. Now, imagine for a moment: what if the Star Wars universe was real? Which it is, but let's just imagine that the Millennium Falcon is out there, okay? Like, if that was a real, true story – it's not – and you read it, you would want to live it; you would want to step into that whole new reality.

The Bible is not made up. It's not make-believe. It's not a figment of the imagination. It's not wishful thinking. It is the real, true story of the world and it calls you, the reader, in particular, as a follower of Jesus, to step into the story and to participate in it.

N.T. Wright, who's a New Testament theologian in Scotland, has this brilliant analogy that, for me, is really helpful. He writes that we should think about the Bible as a five-act play. Okay? So, get your inner thespian on for a minute.

Act one is creation. Act two is the fall. Act three is Israel. That's by far the bulk of the Old Testament. Act four is Jesus. And, act five is the church. In his analogy, he makes the point that we are the people of Jesus. So, we live in act five. But, all we have – and we're like the actors in this play. Okay? We're like the actors in the play that is the story of the Bible. But, all we have is the opening scene of act five, the four Gospels and the book of Acts, and the closing scene, the book of Revelation.

We know where we've come from and we know where we're going. But, we don't have the middle part. And so our job as actors in this play is to improvise. All of you with that secret improve that you always wanted, now is your chance. Our job is to improvise. It's to step into this story as actors and, based on where we know it comes from and where we know it's going, to act out this story to actually carry it forward.

I love that. So, reason number one is to tell you who God is, who we are and how to relate to each other. Reason number two is to tell you the real, true story of human history. And then finally, and this is by far the most important one, so please track with me, is this: to shape the people of God into the image of Jesus so that we can participate in the ongoing story of healing and renewal.

I want to say that again. To shape the people of God into the image of Jesus so that we can participate in the ongoing story of healing and renewal. As I said a moment ago, this is a story that calls its readers to participation. But, to do that, to join in this story where we read about the healing of the sick and prophecy and life and miracles and faith and justice and enemy love, to join in this kind of a story, we have to become a very specific kind of person, right?

We have to become, in particular, like Jesus. This is the main thing I want to say tonight: when you open up your Bible in the morning, tomorrow when you get up, we do not read the Bible just for information, but for formation. Meaning we read the Bible to be formed, to be shaped into the image of Jesus. The scholar Joel B. Green has this to say:

"Reading the Scriptures should be an exercise in our submission to God. We don't read simply for information, but also for formation. We read so the Scriptures will shape us to be more and more like Christ. Spiritual formation is not measured by how much we know about the Bible or how often we read the Bible, but by the way we follow Jesus. This is the bottom line: we can be familiar with much of the Bible and still not love or follow Jesus."

How crazy is that? You can know the Bible, in fact, you can know the Bible really well, and still be a mean, arrogant, foolish jerk. I continue to be shocked at the phenomenon of the mean Christian. You know who I'm talking about? No? Maybe you are the mean Christian then. I mean, that is such a contradiction in terms. And most of the followers of Jesus are – no sales pitch – in all honesty, the nicest people I know. But still, there are some people who claim to be followers of Jesus that are just really lame. And, if you don't know what I'm talking about, just read the Facebook comments on my social media anytime I post anything on non-violence or dare to suggest that maybe, just maybe, followers of Jesus don't need to pack and shoot people.

Crazy, I know. It's just an insane idea. Insane that maybe we're supposed to love our enemies. Wherever you stand on that, the rise of the phenomenon of the mean Christian is just bizarre. But, what's crazy to me is how many of these "mean Christians" are on the conservative side and are "Bible-believing Christians." With all due respect, "Bible-believing" but not "Bible-living." Not at all.

But the Bible was not just designed to be believed, but to be lived. It's not enough to read it, it's not enough to study it, it's not enough to know it backwards and forwards, and it's definitely not enough to believe it. You have to live it. Somewhere along the way, this library became a system of beliefs rather than a way of life. Those two things were never supposed to separate or pull apart. If you circle back to Timothy 3 – and hopefully that's open on your lap in front of you – I think it's fascinating what Paul writes. In 16 he writes how all Scripture is God-breathed. Remember that from last week? It's inspired. And it's useful. I love that. It's useful.

Alright. So, there's our question for the night. Okay. What's it useful for? And there's the word "for" and then there's a laundry list. Teaching how to follow Jesus. Rebuking. Like, that's not how you follow Jesus. Correcting. Training in righteousness.

"Here. That was great. Try this. That was better. Try this."

So that – here's the end goal. Right? Here's what should happen if you read the Bible and you read it well: the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

I love that. Thoroughly equipped. You become a very specific kind of person for every good work, in order to join in what God is up to in the world. Scripture plays the role of a sculptor, shaping your thinking, your feeling, your believing and, out of that, your living. I absolutely love this quote from N.T. Wright:

"The Bible isn't simply a repository of true information about God, Jesus and the hope of the world. It is, rather..." – listen – "...part of the means by which, in the power of the Spirit, the Living God rescues His people and His world and takes them forward on the journey toward His new creation and makes us agents of that new creation even as we travel."

That's why he's famous. How good is that? It is, rather, part of the means by which, in the power of the Spirit, God does His thing. Meaning God is at work through the Scriptures to shape a new covenant community. Meaning a community of men and women and children who come together around Jesus' death, burial and resurrection, to shape all of us into the image of Jesus so that we can participate, we can get out there and join in what God is up to in our city and our world.

Put another way, it is to shape missional community, which, as you know, is the backbone of what Bridgetown Church is all about. Now, here's why this matters. Listen: Scripture isn't the only thing out there that shapes us. Right? We are constantly being shaped. 24/7. In particular, we are being shaped by our habits, our community and our environment. Our habits. That TV show we watch. Any of you have an addiction to some random TV show? Yeah, most of you do I think. For my wife and I, it's the Good Wife right now. Holy cow. Yes. Yes! You know. If you don't, now you know.

That TV show we watch. That daily hour at the gym. That weekly place we eat lunch. Shopping online. Whatever the habit is, listen: do not underestimate the spiritual power of habit to shape you. We are little more than the cumulative effect of our daily habits. What we do on a regular basis, we become.

So, our habits shape us. And then our community, the people that we live by in our apartment complex or on our street, the people we work with, our friends, the church we're a part of or not, all of that has a shaping influence on you.

And our environment. The city we live in, the culture we're a part of and the day and age into which we were born, all of this has a huge shaping influence on your character; on who you actually are from the ground up. We are not passive. We are active in all of this. We want to think – at least I do. I want to think of myself as kind of a concrete wall. Like, "Hey. Nothing gets in." But, I'm more like a chain-link fence. A lot of stuff does. I influence and I'm influenced. I form and I'm formed.

We live in a city that is a formation machine. You know that, right? Portland is a formation machine. It is forming you, it is shaping me into a very specific kind of person. A person that is hedonistic, a lover of food and drink. I mean, just for our local economy to not crash, we all have to have an addiction to eating and drinking out. I love this city. It's seriously so good.

A person who is politically progressive, who is environmentally conscious, who is rebellious and anti-authority and anti-establishment, "Go Cascadia," right? A person who is culturally savvy, smart and intelligent, but not pretentious. That's for New York, not for Portland. A person who's laid back, not a workaholic. A person who does whatever feels good. A person who is marked by moral tolerance, not conviction. A person who is sexually free, or addicted, depending on your perspective.

This city is a formation machine. It is forming you, it is shaping me. Every day, when you step outside your front door, you immediately begin to be shaped into a very specific kind of person. Now, some of it's great. Some of it's fantastic. I travel and I'm like, I'm going to Michigan tomorrow for this thing. They still have Styrofoam there. Styrofoam. Seriously. Like, actual Styrofoam. People actually – like, you look around for recycling and it's not there. It's insane. In-freaking-sane. So, some of what Portland does to you is really good. Okay? But, some of it is not good at all.

Now listen. Listen. This is where the rubber meets the road. The Scriptures are counter-formation. Counter-formation. Meaning they are one of the ways – and there are others

– that we consciously choose to be formed into the image of Jesus and not of Portland. Dallas Willard writes this:

"We come to the Scripture as part of our conscious strategy to cooperate with God for the full redemption of our life."

Do you have a conscious strategy to cooperate with God for the full redemption of your life? Because the reality is that life has an inertia to it. You are becoming a kind of person with each passing second and minute and hour and day. And, if you let the inertia of this city carry you forward, 10 years from now, you will be different than you are now. For better or for worse. And you might not like who you become. The Scriptures are a way to put on the breaks and say, "Yeah, not that. This. Not Portland, as much as I love it, but Jesus of Nazareth. That's who I want to become like."

Ten years from now, I want to look and think and feel and act and vote and live and dress and spend money and speak and express sexuality and be in community and do relationship like Jesus. More and more and more. Now, one of the many ways that we, with conscious, deliberate effort, partner with Jesus to that end is every morning we wake up and we open the Bible. Exodus 25. Getting closer and closer to Leviticus. And we read and we are shaped into the image of Jesus.

You know, we have a number of goals for the Year of Biblical Literacy. One is we want you to read through the Scriptures from Genesis all the way to the end and not bail out in Leviticus. Some of you are like, "I've never read Leviticus. Is it that bad? No, it's not. But, Jeremiah is."

Two, we want you to learn how to read the Scriptures and how to read the Scriptures well. That's what Wednesday night is about. I hope you make it out Wednesday night. Three, we want you to wrap your head around the meta narrative, kind of like the big picture, so when you open to Job or to Ezekiel or Jeremiah or to Jesus or whatever, you kind of know what's going on in the story.

And honestly, if nothing else comes out of the next year other than we, as a community, develop the daily habit of reading the Scripture and listening prayer, coming before God, Bible open, heart and mind open to the Holy Spirit, if that's all that happens in the next year, that's a win. But, that said, our dream is that you would not just read the Bible for the rest of your life, our dream is that you, that I, that we as a community, would be shaped into the image of Jesus. That a year from now and then 10 years from now, and 20, and 30, that we as a community would look and feel more like Jesus than ever before.

Now, obviously, to end, there are a number of challenges that we face, right? And a bunch of you are learning that. Here's two that come to mind really fast. One is just the fact that we don't really read much anymore as a culture. At least not read books. I read recently that – get this stat. It's insane. 78% of Americans never read a book all the way through after completing their last year of education. Seriously. No wonder we're so messed up. That's crazy.

Now, some of you, I know a ton of you, are readers. I am. We have a book table out there. Fantastic. But, as a general rule in our culture at large, we don't really read anymore. Or we read, but I mean we read a news app or a Twitter feed – which doesn't really count, by the way – or an Instagram post. Or I love when I'm scrolling through Instagram and somebody's like, "I love..." – not to me, but somebody else – "...your writing."

I'm like, "Your writing? It's three sentences."

Does that really count? It's a social media post. Does that count as writing? I mean, maybe. But they're short. But, that's what we're used to. It's like, "Oh, you read a book? Great. I read an Instagram post."

"What? All the way to the end? Like, you actually...? Nobody does that anymore. That's crazy."

You know? So, we'll read an online article here, there, pick up the paper if we're waiting for our latte or whatever at Barista. But we just, as a culture, we're not used to reading books anymore. A book moves at a very different pace, right? We'll talk about that in a week or two. So, that's one challenge. But, here's the even greater challenge. Listen: when we do read a book, usually we read either for information or for entertainment.

Information: we are taught at a very young age – I have three kids in grade school. My kids are indoctrinated to read a book for information. You read this book, you study to take the test and get a good grade. Or for entertainment. Any of you here like to read? Oh, man. In particular, if you're an introvert. It's like a movie but better and there's not all those annoying people around. You know?

Some of us love to read. I read 107 books last year. Just over my goal of two books a week, which is fantastic. Now, if that sounds intimidating, a lot of those were like young adult novels. So, what can I say? But still, 107 books. That's not bad, right? So, I love to read. For me, I read every single night before I go to bed. I would rather read a book than hang out or go see a movie. I just love it, right?

So, that's not bad. It's not bad to read for entertainment. It's not bad to read for information. I do it every day. So do a lot of you. But, when we come to the Bible, we don't primarily read for information, although there's a lot of information in here and a lot of stuff that God does want you to know. And we definitely don't read – at least not primarily – for entertainment. I mean, some of it is quite entertaining. The Psalms are just poetic and haunting. Quite a few of the stories, you can't put down. But a lot of it, let's be honest, isn't all that fun.

This next chunk, we're into the second half of Exodus now. You get through about Exodus 34 and then it's not a lot of fun until Deuteronomy. You're thinking, "There's three books in there."

Exactly. Now, there's great stuff. Deuteronomy is amazing. It was Jesus favorite book of the Bible, as far as we can tell. He would quote from Deuteronomy more than ever. I mean, Deuteronomy's fantastic. Right? But, in between now and Deuteronomy, there's like six weeks. Yep. Exactly. So, when you open it up, some of you will love it. Sometimes you'll read Exodus 33 or Exodus 34 and think, "Oh my gosh. This is amazing." Other times you'll read it and think you have no idea what the heck that is about.

That's okay. That's fine. This isn't The Hunger Games, okay? We're not reading this for fun. We're reading this to meet with God. We'll talk about this in a week or two. The Scriptures are a sacrament, a moment of encounter between heaven and earth. When the life of heaven and the life of earth, with all of its problems and issues and pain and hope and joy and suffering, interact. And, in that moment of overlap, tomorrow morning, Bible open, maybe a cup of coffee, maybe not, heart and mind open to the Holy Spirit, "God, here I am. Have Your way. Come. Speak over my life."

In that moment of overlap between heaven and earth, you are shaped in a far more profound way than what this city could ever do to you. So, may you read your Bible this coming week, may you step into this real, true story of the world and relate and figure out how to relate to God. And may it shape you and shape me and shape our community into the image of Jesus.

Let's stand and pray.

Would you invite the Holy Spirit with me? Holy Spirit, we invite You and ask You to come. We ache for You, God, for more of You. The teaching is great, we love to learn and to open the Bible and to figure stuff out, but at the end of the day, we're here, God, to meet with You and we're so grateful for who You are and for Your presence even here and now and all that You've done in our community, but we ache for more, God. I just want more of You.

So, Holy Spirit, come and have Your way as we worship in the next few minutes. Come. We pray for the manifestations of the Spirit. We pray for prophecy and healing and words of wisdom and knowledge and miracles and faith and freedom from the demonic. Real, true identity, the end of fear, anxiety, depression. Inner-healing from the soul out from the past. I pray for all of that. Holy Spirit, come. But, at the end of the day, it's You, not just the stuff You do, but who You are that we ache for the most. Spirit come. And even now, we pray that You would speak over us as a community.