

Judging by the Scriptures

Hebrews 4:12-13
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Founding father Thomas Jefferson is known to have taken a knife to the Scriptures. He literally cut out all the parts about Jesus' divinity – all his miracles and signs, and his resurrection. He did this because the emerging idea of his time was that reason and reason alone is the primary authority in life, a higher power and truer guide than even faith and the Scriptures. The result was a word of God that was edited to suit Jefferson, rather than Jefferson being edited or shaped to align with God's word.

Today we conclude our sermon series on the purpose of scripture, in which we've turned to it for guidance, illumination and spiritual sustenance the first three Sundays. And now today, we look at how the scriptures can be used to improve our lives and the lives of friends and family.

In order for scripture to improve your life and the lives of your friends and family, it must be a part of your life, and in some way, shared with your friends and family, even if it's just sharing who you are as someone shaped and guided by the word of God.

Today's New Testament lesson says, "The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow." In other words, scripture is like an instrument to be used in shaping who we are, cutting away those parts of us that get in the way of being the person God sees you to be.

"Before him," says Hebrews, "no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account." God sees you as you are, the good the bad and the hidden. God sees all of it.

The good news is that through Christ, God sees only the good in us. Even better news is that in Christ, God comes to you, to guide you and transform you into the person God made you to be. And he does this through the Living Word of God, which is the scripture in the Bible and the Spirit of God in our hearts.

The problem with all of this is that some people don't want to be shaped by God. Some people don't have the time or patients, and some people don't think they need it, they don't think they have anything they need to change or work on, at least nothing important.

As human beings we are able to rationalize all sorts of things that, taken together, would be a great opportunity to make meaningful improvements in our lives. Something as trivial as telling ourselves -rationalizing- that we need the protein just to justify eating that third piece of sausage.

The problem with these little rationalizations is that they can become our routine practices. We do such a good job convincing ourselves of whatever we want to believe that we no longer look very hard at reality, we avoid the truth of our motivations, and in doing so, we miss out on becoming our better selves. That's rationalization.

And then there's being overly defensive. Some opportunities for spiritual growth come in the form of criticism or observations from others. And yet, we can be so defensive that we don't even stop for a minute to consider what someone is pointing out about us. We miss that chance to improve. Some people find it easier to argue that the other person is unbalanced or ignorant, too liberal or too conservative, narrow-minded or grudge-bearing, uninformed or has an ax to grind.

The point is, it's easy to criticize others, but the real power is in looking at ourselves, recognizing our own need to grow and mature. And in fact, if it's true that God can judge the thoughts and intentions of our hearts, than we better take a closer look at ourselves. I mean, think about it. Your every thought and feeling seen and known by God – is that good news or bad? Are you worried about what God and God alone knows about you?

Of course, everyone and all people harbor thoughts and feelings that when, standing before God, would greatly concern them, having to justify yourself before God, render an account, as Hebrews says.

So in that sense, it is bad news that God knows your innermost thoughts and feelings. But in another sense, it's good news, even great news. The great news is that you now recognize there are things in your life, things about you that you can work on, with God's help. Don't you?

The word of God cuts to the core of the human heart, exposing both its beauty and its brokenness, and removing whatever doesn't belong. When we invite it into our lives, the word of God invites us to look a little deeper. Feel free to do that now, in this moment. Look deeper into your heart.

Now, this doesn't have to be as heavy a process as it sounds. It's OK to have some fun with the scriptures. Take for instance this silly little story I ran across last week. A father was reading Bible stories to his young son, saying, "The man named Lot was warned to take his wife and flee out of the city, but his wife looked back and was turned to salt." His son asked, "What happened to the flea?" ... Take his wife and flee out of the city. Silly, I know.

But it shows us that engaging with scripture doesn't have to be a heavy process; it can be fun and life-giving. Just looking at a few verses of scripture each day can have an amazing effect on your life. You don't even need to come with something in mind, some concern or failing that's bothering you. You don't even have to believe it's worth your time.

No matter how you approach looking at scripture each day, I guarantee it you will be amazed and delighted by what you encounter, the insight and inspiration you gain, the guidance and comfort you receive, just by reading a few verses of scripture each day. Can you do that? Can you try?

How many people here have been keeping up – more or less – with the devotional book we gave out a two weeks ago, Jesus Calling? That's great. You know what I mean. I hope you are letting it seep into your heart, into your life. I mean look at the one from Wednesday, when I wrote the first draft of this sermon. It says: "Let my love seep into the inner recesses of your being. Do not close off any part of yourself from me. I know you inside and out, so do not try to present a "cleaned-up" self to me. Wounds that you shut away from the light of my love will fester and become wormy. Secret sins that you "hide" from me can split off and develop lives of their own, controlling you without your realizing it. Open yourself fully to my transforming presence. Let my brilliant love-light search out and destroy hidden fears. This process requires time alone with me, as my love soaks into your innermost being. Enjoy my perfect love, which expels every trace of fear."

Now, that passage is based primarily on Psalm 139, which I selected two days earlier last month to go with our Old Testament lesson for today's sermon. The Living Word of God was out ahead of me by at least two days, planning this happy coincidence.

God meets us where we are, with just what we need, and all it takes is the willingness to look at a bit scripture each day, allow the words and the Spirit to have their way with you, and allow yourself to be shaped by God into the person he already sees you to be. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Lord, our heads are filled with the worries of the day. Our lives are restless with the changing of the times.

We are tempted to think we are caught in the web of uncontrollable circumstance and that there is no hope – and we despair.

Reveal to us your living and active presence in our lives and in this world. Help us to rise above the worries of the day, and to know that you are here, that your desire for this world is and will take shape, even amid the struggles and sorrows all around us.

Help us live in the world and guide us. Make your will and purpose known and felt in the laws we pass, in the rumors we stop, in the risks we take, in the convictions we show, in the issues we face, the people we aid, and in the sins we confess and confront.

We pray for those who grieve the loss of a loved one, and those who are even now drawing near to the fullness of your being. We pray your Spirit of comfort and restoration for Scot Kelley, Ruth Lamb, Jennifer Roe Rankin, Robbie Sullivan, Leo Bray and Will Ratcliff. We pray all this in the powerful name of Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray together saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we
forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation but deliver us
from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory
forever. Amen.**