

## ***Becoming Spiritually Mature through God's Word***

A New Creation – Unit III: Session 1

June 3, 2018

### **Call to Worship:**

*Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked*

*or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers,*

<sup>2</sup> *but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night.*

<sup>3</sup> *That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither— whatever they do prospers.*

<sup>4</sup> *Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away.*

<sup>5</sup> *Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.* <sup>6</sup> *For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.*

Psalm 1 (NIV)

### **Scripture Reading:**

<sup>1</sup> *Blessed are those whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the LORD.*

<sup>2</sup> *Blessed are those who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart—*

<sup>3</sup> *they do no wrong but follow his ways.*

<sup>4</sup> *You have laid down precepts that are to be fully obeyed.*

<sup>5</sup> *Oh, that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees!*

<sup>6</sup> *Then I would not be put to shame when I consider all your commands.*

<sup>7</sup> *I will praise you with an upright heart as I learn your righteous laws.*

<sup>8</sup> *I will obey your decrees; do not utterly forsake me.*

<sup>9</sup> *How can a young person stay on the path of purity? By living according to your word.*

<sup>10</sup> *I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands.*

<sup>11</sup> *I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.*

<sup>12</sup> *Praise be to you, LORD; teach me your decrees.*

<sup>13</sup> *With my lips I recount all the laws that come from your mouth.*

<sup>14</sup> *I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches.*

<sup>15</sup> *I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways.*

<sup>16</sup> *I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word.* Psalm 119:1-16 (NIV)

This morning we are beginning Unit III of our series *A New Creation*. The first part was on believing, the second on belonging, and this morning - becoming. As Christians during our time here on earth we are always becoming. We should be becoming transformed more and more into the image of our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ. This transformation is nothing that we can do on our own, all we can do is place ourselves in the position for God to transform us through the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers.

During this part of the series we will be exploring four spiritual disciplines that we can engage in which place us in a position for the Holy Spirit to work. They are certainly not the only four, but some of the most important ones, especially the first two, this week's on Becoming Spiritually Mature through God's Word, and next week's, Becoming Spiritually Mature through Prayer. I

think this morning is most important! Why? Because other than through his Son, Jesus Christ, God's written word, otherwise known as the Bible, or the Scriptures, is the primary way that God has chosen to reveal himself to human beings. Yet, most of the church today, though we have more access to God's written word than at any other time in human history, seems to have lost the sense of the power and the authority of God's written word.

It's one thing to say that we believe in the authority of God's word, it's another thing to live our lives as if it is the authority over our life.

Last weekend while I was on vacation in Charlotte, North Carolina I visited a church nearby where my sister lives. I try and attend church while on vacation for two important reasons: one) I do believe that God's desire for me is to worship him with other believers on a Sunday morning whenever possible, whether home or away; and two) I like to try and learn from other churches about how they do worship.

Well, this church is one of the largest churches in the Charlotte area. A non-denominational church with four or five campuses. The one I attended is the largest. I'm guessing somewhere between 1,000 and 2,000 people who attend one of the three weekend services. The Pastor is fairly well known, the author of several Christian books. I have attended and listened to his sermons before.

I arrived early, unlike most of the regular attenders. There were people out in the parking lot to direct me where to park. This church not only had a coffee bar for the adults, they offered snow cones to the children. I was torn between the two. If it was ice cream cones I wouldn't have been so torn ☺.

Now, you couldn't take the snow cones into the auditorium. Actually the snow cones were not the only thing not allowed in the auditorium, neither were the kids. Well you could have brought your children in but they had their own place to go. There were no children or kids in the auditorium for the entire service. Yes, it might be good for the young adults being able to pay attention, but it was rather awkward having no children in there.

I also don't feel so bad anymore when I look around our sanctuary at 9:30 and wonder where all the people all. At 9:30 there, when the worship service started with video clips, there was almost no one in there. Then the worship team started to play and as time went on, over the course of about 10-15 minutes, it filled up. The worship team played and sang for almost 30 minutes. I say played and sang because that's really all they did. They themselves were very good but they did very little in leading others to worship. For most of the 30 minutes most of the people just stood and watched them sing and play.

Then the pastor came out to bring his message. The message was pretty good, but it really wasn't based on the Bible or Scripture, though he did throw a few verses in it as he went along. Not that I haven't delivered sermons like that before, but if that is the type of sermon delivered on most Sunday's, it would be hard to say that the church believes strongly in the authority of the word of God.

At the end of his message he prayed a brief prayer and we were dismissed. And I left there thinking, did I miss something? It took me a while to figure out what it was that I missed, and then it dawned on me. I missed the worship of God. The service was almost all about us. Sadly that is the state of many of the churches in America today. It's not just some of the contemporary and non-denominational ones. It's also the mainline traditional ones.

This is no little matter! You see I came to faith in Jesus Christ through the word of God. It's the word of God which convicted me of the sin in my life and that I needed to repent from my sinfulness, to change, and to walk in a new direction. It was the word of God which told me that I needed to be reborn again. It was through the written word of God where I found my Savior and Lord Jesus Christ. It was what I believed was the high view of the authority of Scripture, especially the teachings of Jesus, that attracted me to the Mennonite church. I remember visiting the Mennonite church in New York for the first time and seeing all the people bringing their Bibles to church, opening them up and reading them during the sermon, and again during Sunday school. I remember thinking that these people really take the word of God, the Bible, and their Christian faith seriously. I wanted to be a part of who they were.

Early on I read the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* because I wanted to know what these Mennonites believe. I remember reading Article 4 on Scripture –

“We believe that all Scripture is inspired by God through the Holy Spirit for instruction in salvation and training in righteousness. We accept the Scriptures as the Word of God and as the fully reliable and trustworthy standard for Christian faith and life...

“We accept the Bible as the Word of God written . . . We also acknowledge the Scripture as the fully reliable and trustworthy Word of God written in human language. We believe that God continues to speak through the living and written Word. Because Jesus is the Word became flesh, Scripture as a whole has its center and fulfillment in him.

“We acknowledge the Scripture as the authoritative source and standard for preaching and teaching about faith in life, for distinguishing truth from error, for discerning between good and evil, and for guiding prayer and worship. Other claims on our understanding of Christian faith and life, such as tradition, culture, experience, reason, and political powers, need to be tested and corrected by the light of Holy Scripture.”

*Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, Article 4, Scripture

It's hard to read that and come away not thinking that the Mennonite Church has a high view of the authority of Scripture. But what I have discovered in my 20 years now of being a part of the Mennonite church, is that maybe it doesn't have as high a view of the authority of Scripture as it once had, or what it says it believes in its *Confession of Faith*.

The apostle Paul wrote to his young protégé Timothy,  
*As for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it,*<sup>15</sup> *and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*<sup>16</sup> *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,*<sup>17</sup> *so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*

2 Timothy 3:14-16 (NIV)

How important is the Bible to you? How often do you read it? How do you read it? I personally don't find words like "inerrant" or "infallible" that helpful to us today. To me it isn't so important as to whether or not there are any errors or inconsistencies in the Bible versions as we have them today, though studies have shown that many of most common ones are tremendously consistent, what is important is do we believe that the Bible as a whole is the authoritative word of God, inspired by Him, to lead people to Jesus Christ for salvation to eternal life and the transformation of our lives today? To me it's a faith and trust issue.

In the commentary of Article 4 of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* it reads,

"The church confesses and recognizes the authority of Holy Scripture; it does not take upon itself the right to give the Scripture its authority. Precisely how God has inspired the Scriptures through the Holy Spirit is not explained in the Bible. We therefore content ourselves with the assurance that Scripture is fully reliable and trustworthy because the One who has inspired it is faithful and true."

The authors of both our Call to Worship, Psalm 1, and our primary Scripture this morning, the beginning of Psalm 119, though they are both unknown, had a high view of the authority of Scripture. King David, who wrote almost half of the Psalms, had a high view of the authority of God's Word:

*The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul.*

*The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple.*

<sup>8</sup> *The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart.*

*The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes.*

<sup>9</sup> *The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever.*

*The decrees of the LORD are firm, and all of them are righteous.*

<sup>10</sup> *They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold;*

*they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb.*

<sup>11</sup> *By them your servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward.*

Psalm 19:7-11 (NIV)

Jesus himself had a high view of the authority of the Word of God. Of course for him it was the Old Testament Scriptures. The only story found in the Bible of Jesus' life from an infant all the way through almost 30 years old was when he was 12 and he's in the temple sitting at the rabbis' feet listening to the word of God expounded. When Jesus came to earth he emptied himself of most of his divine nature and then he spent the first thirty years of his life being filled with God's word and the Holy Spirit. If it was important for Jesus to be filled with the word of God and the Holy Spirit, how much more important for us, his followers?

The Sunday school lesson for today offers us some good instruction on how to become spiritually mature through God's word. Like, when is the best time to read the Bible? The best time to read the Bible is when you are at your best, and we're all different. For me it is the early morning. If I wait until the evening, before bed, there is not much of a chance I will read the Bible, and if I do, I don't take in very much. So I try and spend at least an hour early in the morning in God's word.

How much should we read? I think it's good to vary it. If you have never read through the entire Bible, you should try doing that over the course of a year. That's really the only way to get the big picture of God's word. Read through a book of the Bible, one at a time. Read the four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke & John. Another good resource is what is known as the common lectionary which gives you four different readings each week – an Old Testament reading, a gospel reading, a New Testament reading apart from the gospels and a Psalm. Over the course of three years it takes you through most of the Bible. The nice thing about the lectionary is that it seems more like God is speaking to me than just me trying to find what I want to hear, and the readings are usually specific to the church calendar, especially Advent, Christmas and Easter.

There are all kinds of reading programs out there. There is a wonderful internet site called [Biblegateway.com](http://Biblegateway.com) There is an app you can download on your phone called "You Version" which has just about every Bible version out there and many different reading programs from reading through the entire Bible in a year, different Books of the Bible, or different topics. For those of us who live in the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> century there is absolutely no excuse for not reading the Bible on a fairly regular basis. Yes, we can say we just don't have time, but that's more of a priority issue. The truth is we find lots of time for things that will have no lasting and eternal value.

Perhaps what is most important when it comes to reading the Bible is how we interpret it. Our Sunday school lesson for today does a good job of highlighting the four most common ways of interpreting the Scriptures.

1. **The "flat Bible" approach** which assumes that all of the Bible is equally authoritative. That the teachings of Moses are considered equal with the teachings of Jesus. This approach makes it seem that God often has two wills. This approach makes it difficult trying to decide where God is at today on issues such as capital punishment and the use of violence by his people. Because the flat Bible approach fails to see Jesus as the ultimate authority, the church ends up all over the map on many issues.
2. **The dispensational approach** assumes that God has a different will and standards for different dispensations or time periods. Some of the different dispensations include the time of Adam & Eve, Noah, Abraham, the Law, the church age, and the future kingdom to come. Most people who follow this approach do not believe that *the Sermon on the Mount* applies to us today, that it is describing a future reign of Jesus here on earth; therefore the teachings of Jesus [especially the most challenging ones on sexuality, marriage and divorce, loving our enemies and turning the other cheek] are not for us today." I don't know about other Christians but I am not willing to risk that Jesus' teachings and commands don't apply to us today.
3. **The Christological approach** which recognizes that the New Testament is based on a new covenant between God and humans. It teaches that the Old Testament looked forward to the coming of Christ, and that Jesus Christ is the center of Scripture. It's like he's right there between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament was looking forward to Jesus' coming, the New Testament is looking back at his coming, as well as looking forward to his coming again. The Christological approach gets us

closer to how we should read Scripture but it still falls short. It focuses mostly on what Jesus did on the cross and the future eternal life for believers. But it gives little attention to the teaching, life and ministry of Jesus and what it means for his followers today. Hence, the lives of many Christians today don't look that different from non-Christians

Mennonites and Anabaptists have traditionally followed the fourth approach, that which is known as

4. **The ethical, Christ-centered approach** which assumes that God and God's will are most clearly and fully known in Jesus Christ. While God revealed himself to Abraham, Moses, David, and the prophets, God revealed himself most fully by coming to earth in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus was completely obedient and faithful to God and is today the living Word of God. The Christ-centered approach says that while the written Scriptures, both the Old Testament and the New Testament are the authoritative written word of God, who revealed himself over time, Jesus (his life, teachings, death and resurrection) is the ultimate authority on how to understand or interpret any passage. Because Jesus is the fullest revelation of God and God's will, all Scripture must be read and interpreted in the spirit and nature of Jesus.

Yes, the Bible is authoritative, but Jesus is the final authority.

*In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.*

Hebrews 1:1-3b (NIV)

And a word of caution when it comes to reading the Bible. It says a little further ahead in Hebrews 4:12,

*For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*

Hebrews 4:12 (NIV)

Maybe there should be a "Danger" or "Warning" sticker on the outside of every Bible with words something like this, "this Book contains the word of God, be careful how you use it – it can give life or it can take it away."

Sadly many well intentioned Christians over the years have used it for both. Especially when we just throw out verses thinking we'll helping people in certain situations. Or, we put the final authority on the written word of God as opposed to Jesus.

The word of God is supposed to lead us to Jesus – the one who is full of grace and truth, the one who gives salvation and eternal life. We should come to the Bible not so much to find knowledge, or so we can say "I've read through the entire Bible so many times so far in my life,

or I can quote this many Bible verses. Ultimately we should be coming to the Bible to find Jesus and to allow him to continually transform our lives.

We should be coming to the Bible to have a transforming encounter with the living God who chose to reveal himself through the written word and through his Son, Jesus Christ.

Robert Mulholland wrote in his book, *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation*, “As Christians we should always check our primary reason for coming to the Word of God. Our primary purpose for coming to the Bible should almost always be to have a transforming encounter with God.”