

## THE FOCUS FOR GOD'S WORD

Luke 24:36-49

Focusing light—it is what enables us to see electronically whether it be what is on our computer screens, our cell phones, or, (when we get to return to them) in movie theaters. If I put the slide on the screen out of focus, we cannot see it clearly. That doesn't just involve the focusing of light on a camera to give us a picture of the image we are trying to capture, but it also involves the focusing of electrons that make the image on a screen. Even more we could not see at all without the lenses in our corneas focusing the light that goes to our retinas which produce the signals that go to our brains.

God's Word is similar. It needs focus. There are all kinds of views about Scriptures. We need to focus light because the natural tendency of light is to scatter. It needs some kind of lens to make it focus. So does God's Word. One of the reasons why the Roman Catholic Church has stated that their teachings are based both on Scriptures and tradition is that if you just simply say Scripture, then you get all kinds of different interpretations. Look at all the Protestant groups there are in the world! People can take God's Word and use it for all kinds of things. Here are some examples:

Antisemitism—for centuries the Jews were called “the killers of Jesus.” This was used to justify keeping them in separate areas of town called “ghettos” and seizing their property when others got jealous of their wealth. The Klu Klux Klan was as much against Jews and Roman Catholics as they were African Americans, and they twisted the Bible to support this attitude. But this disregards that except for Luke, everyone who wrote a book in the Bible was a descendant of Abraham, the father of all Jews including Jesus Himself. John in His Gospel calls the enemies of Jesus “the Jews;” but in his writing we can tell he is talking about the religious leaders of the Jews, not all Jews. It is also clear to anyone knowing the Greek of the New Testament that the man who wrote the book of John was someone whose native language was Aramaic, the language of the Jews in Jesus' time.

Racism—I stated before about the Klu Klux Klan. They used the account of Noah to explain that Noah's son Ham was cursed because he made fun of his father. They stated that the descendants of Ham were Africans. Yes, Ham was cursed, but the Bible tells us his descendants were the Canaanites in Israel, not the Africans—and that they were the ones who so often led the Israelites into pagan worship.

Violence—People look in the Old Testament and read the stories about how God told the Israelites to kill all the people and animals in cities like Jericho. It was a principle called “cherem” in Hebrew, which means those were “dedicated” to God. In the Old Testament God used the nation of Israel to advance His Kingdom. Places like Jericho were pagan and practiced

infant, child, and virgin sacrifice. But with the coming of Jesus God's Kingdom works only through the Gospel, not politics or violence.

Moralism—The Bible can be used to make things legalistic. The religious leaders of the Jewish community in which Jesus lived used God's commands in the Old Testament as a basis to come up with all kinds of rules that enabled them to be "better" than the common people and give them control over them.

Conversely people use the Bible to defend their desire to free themselves to do whatever they want. They speak about how Jesus calls us to love and say that if we speak against any kind of immorality in the lives of others, we are being "unloving."

Anti-woman—the phrase "wives obey your husbands" in Ephesians 5 has been used to justify all kinds of abuse against women. The direction of St. Paul to women is seen as sexist. This ignores that Paul does not say "obey" for wives in the same way he says "obey" to children with their parents. Instead Paul speaks of "submitting," which is what Jesus did to the will of His Father. In the Christian Church there is no higher calling than to serve as Jesus served us. The very fact that Jesus, Peter, and Paul even talked to and about women showed they were anything but sexist.

Yet, as these attacks go on and on we can feel overwhelmed especially when people express their opinions so smoothly. And many of the responses to these are filled with holes because they make assumptions that are not true, like being able to prove scientifically what the Bible says. With all the information out there and since we are reading something written centuries ago in different languages and in a different cultural setting than ours, how can we ever get real focus on God's Word?

But it isn't just our world today. Think of the disciples whom Jesus appeared to Easter evening in our Gospel lesson. They knew the Old Testament. But they still had it wrong. They saw God's promises being fulfilled by a new King David who would overthrow the hated Romans and make Israel rule on earth. That is why they were so shocked to see Jesus risen from the dead. They didn't believe the women who had gone to the tomb that morning. What the two disciples from Emmaus said about eating with the risen Jesus they doubted. And when Jesus appeared alive to them, they still needed Him to eat food to prove He was real and alive. God's Word is God's Word, but it needs a focus, something to bring it all together.

That is what the disciples received as Jesus "opened to them the Scripture." Jesus did not use some magic like a crystal ball to open their minds. He didn't come up with the right algorithm to crack the code; He didn't zap their minds. He shared with them the Old Testament, God's Word, in light of Him standing there—the risen Lord Jesus. The two disciples from Emmaus who had just walked home with Jesus without knowing that it was Jesus stated

afterwards, “Were not our hearts burning within us while He talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” But they didn’t fully understand until their eyes were opened up to recognize that they had been talking to Jesus risen from the dead. John, in his Gospel, tells us that the disciples heard things from Jesus that they did not understand until, “After He was raised from the dead, His disciples recalled what He had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.” There is something that can give focus and clarity to all of Scripture—Jesus Christ crucified and risen from the dead!

Martin Luther gave a simple direction to how to read and hear the Scriptures. He said we should be constantly asking the question, “How does this “push” Christ?” The Bible is God’s wonderful gift to us. But it is useless unless we see that Jesus Christ, God’s Son, is the Word of God, the key to it all. Luther saw the Scriptures as the manger that holds the baby Jesus for us.

Christians will talk about being “Bible-believing.” They are trying to emphasize the truth of God’s Word. But we do not believe in the Bible, we believe in Jesus Christ. It is not that we are convinced that the Bible is true, so then we put our faith in Jesus, but the other way around. The Bible conveys Jesus to us. We put our faith in Him, so then we trust the word that brings Him to us. The Holy Spirit does not lead us to the Bible, but He uses the Bible to bring us to Christ.

As we get older, a lot of us need glasses to read. The glasses refocus the light so we can read what would be out of focus. Jesus is the “glasses” we can all put on to open our minds, to put into focus the Scriptures.

As we look at the Bible we find that stories and passages that lead us to Christ become the basis for understanding those that are less clear. We use Scripture to interpret Scripture and the risen Jesus to interpret Scripture. For instance all those laws in the Old Testament are not important for us to follow, but they show us what Jesus has fulfilled for us. God’s use of a political nation—Israel-- in the Old Testament has been replaced by a spiritual nation, the body of Christ, the “New Israel,” the Church. Condemnations in the Bible are most important to us as they lead us to forgiveness in Jesus. Jesus Christ—risen from the dead! That was the heart of the message that those disciples would proclaim to the world. And it is the heart and center of how we look at and proclaim Scriptures today.

God could just “zap” us and program our minds to understand it all. We would be like the perfect computer exactly having all the right information in the right order. But God has chosen to open our minds by His Word, the Word the Holy Spirit uses to bring Christ to us.

The pandemic caused a lot of people to do home activities like putting together puzzles. I find that when I do it I struggle to find the right pieces, then have periods when several fit very quickly one after the other. It is hard to be consistent.

This past year one of the greats in baseball passed away—Hank Aaron. He is the one who broke Babe Ruth's record for most career home runs and still has the most RBI's. The amazing thing about Aaron is that he never hit 50 home runs during any season. Instead he consistently hit over 35 for over 20 seasons. That is amazing when streaks are usually so important to hitters.

God gives us something consistent in Christ Jesus. We will always have our questions about what is said in the Bible. But the important thing is what is so clear to us through faith in Jesus. Jesus Christ is risen! He is risen indeed, Alleluia!