

**The Practices of Jesus: Scripture**  
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church  
January 5, 2020- AM Service  
Reverend Peter Jonker  
Matthew 4:1-11

As we enter into the season after Epiphany we will once again reflect on Jesus' life. During advent and Christmas, we think about Christ's coming to earth as a child, the miracle of God becoming flesh. During Lent and Easter, we think about Christ's death and resurrection, how He died for our sins and rose from the dead to make everything new. Obviously, Christ's birth is really important, and Christ's death and resurrection are really important. But everything in the middle matters too! So during Epiphany we think about all the stuff in the middle. Because while Jesus saves us by His birth, death and resurrection, in His life He teaches us how to live.

Specifically, this season we will look at the practices of Jesus. Human life gets its shape from practices. Our hearts are shaped by our habits. The things we do every day, every week, every year mold our hearts and our instincts. What were Jesus' habits? What were the things He practiced every day? What were His instincts? Over the next 8 weeks we will look at the things that Jesus did habitually and we will see what these habits teach us about how to be a human being. The first habit we will look at is the habit of Scripture. What we are about to read is the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. At the end of chapter 3, He is baptized in the Jordan river, the Spirit descends on Him, the Father says "This is my beloved Son," and then this happens in Matthew 4.

The Bible doesn't exactly say, but I wonder if Jesus was surprised by the way His ministry started. Jesus is baptized, the Spirit descends on him, and the Father declares, "This is my Son whom I love, with Him I am well-pleased." But no sooner has the Father declared His love, then the Spirit leads Jesus out into the desert for 40 days. I love you. Wilderness. That had to be hard.

What was Jesus' physical and emotional state after those 40 days? Jesus was hungry. The text specifically says that. What else would he have been? He definitely would have been tired. He probably would have been lonely too. So He's hungry, lonely and tired. What happens to our soul when we are hungry, lonely and tired? Bad things, mostly. When we are hungry, lonely and tired we are in a place of spiritual vulnerability. Hungry, lonely and tired people are much more susceptible to temptation. Lust, bitterness, addiction, anger—these are the kinds of things that take us down when we are hungry, lonely and tired. So Jesus is in this spiritually vulnerable state and that's when the devil attacks. Jesus is hungry, lonely and tired and that's when the devil hits Him with everything he has. It's brutal. But it also feels real. It feels like this is how things go in real life. We're worn out, and here comes the temptation.

How does Jesus survive this assault? In this spiritually vulnerable state, what holds Him steady against temptation? It's the Bible. Three times the devil comes at Him, three times Jesus turns the devil aside, and each time He uses Scripture to do it. Clearly the Word is planted deep inside of Him, and in a time of spiritual vulnerability, that word becomes a shield against the devil's attack. Dale Bruner sums it up this way: "Jesus was a man of Scripture," and the temptations are meant to teach us that fact.

Where else do we see Jesus practicing Scripture? It's interesting: Over the course of his ministry, Jesus calls us to do all sorts of things: turn the other cheek, pray to the Father, forgive one another, care for the poor. All sorts of commands. All sorts of instructions. But Jesus never

says, 'Read your Bible.' Jesus never says 'Memorize Scripture.' Jesus never says, 'You should all attend a Bible study at least once a week.' He doesn't say it because He doesn't need to. Scripture is woven into the fabric of everything he does. He quotes it, He interprets it, He debates its meaning with teachers, He alludes to it, He re-enacts it. Read through the gospels and the biblical references are everywhere. Sometimes they're right out there in a quote, other times they're just beneath the surface as an allusion, but its presence is unmistakable. Jesus practiced scripture. Jesus was a man of scripture; it's knit into the fabric of everything He does. Today, I want to share with you three ways in which we see Jesus practice scripture.

First, Jesus uses scripture to maintain his true identity. Notice that in every one of the three temptations the evil one tries to get Jesus to question His identity. The first two temptations start with "If you are the son of God..." that's another way of the devil saying, 'You're the son of God?! You?! Are you sure?! I'm sorry, I'm going to need you to prove it to me.' At His baptism, the Father just affirmed Jesus' true identity, "You are my beloved son and I am pleased with you!" Now the devil is trying to push Him off that identity, "God's son, is that really who you are?"

This is what the evil one does. He sends us voices that try to push us off our true identity. In our baptism, God says to us: "I am your Father. You are my beloved child! I loved you so much that I sent my son to die for you." But in the middle of life, in the middle of the wilderness, accusing voices pop into our head. They question that identity. They say things like: "You are a failure. No one likes you. You're making a mess of everything. You're unforgivable." Sometimes we feel like we're sinking under the weight of these accusations. And that's true of all of us. It's not just insecure teenagers who struggle with this stuff; even successful, mature Christians hear these accusing voices in their heads. These accusations are all lies of course, and the devil would be more than happy if we let these lies define us. But when we practice scripture, when we turn to it daily, the Holy Spirit weaves it into the fabric of our lives and we have a shield on against the devil and his attacks. The accuser's voice says, "You are a failure." But Scripture says, "I have called you by name and you are mine. When you pass through the waters I will be with you." (Isaiah 43:2) The accuser's voice says, "no one likes you." Scripture's voice says, "The Lord takes great delight in you...He rejoices over you with singing." (Zephaniah 3:17) The accuser's voice says, "Your life is a hopeless mess." But Scripture's voice says, "If anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation! 'I will forgive your iniquities and remember your sins no more!'" (2 Corinthians 5:12, Psalm 103). When we practice Scripture, the Holy Spirit grounds us in our true baptismal identity.

Second, Jesus uses Scripture to help Him properly interpret the times. Jesus is in the wilderness. He's hungry, lonely and tired, and now He's being tormented. It would be easy to interpret his situation in the worst possible light. It would be easy for Him to say, "God has abandoned me. Evil is winning. Goodness is losing!" Scripture keeps Him from this dark habit of mind. Jesus quotes three texts to ward off the devil. Did you catch which book they were from? If you look down in the footnotes of your Bible, you will see that they are all from the book of Deuteronomy. When did the book of Deuteronomy take place? Where were God's people in the book of Deuteronomy? They were in the desert! They were in the wilderness!

Why do you think Jesus has got Deuteronomy on the mind? Could it be that as He goes through his wilderness, as He endures his hunger, Jesus reminds himself that God brought Israel through their wilderness and their hunger? Because He knows the story of what God has done in the past, Jesus doesn't see this wilderness as meaningless torment. He understands that the paths

of His Father go through wilderness places and God is with us in those places. Deuteronomy helps Him to properly interpret his circumstances.

Jesus does the same thing on the cross. In the middle of His torture, Jesus feels abandoned by His Father and He calls out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me!” That is Psalm 22:1. On the one hand this call is an expression of how Jesus actually feels—He really does feel like God has turned away. But on the other hand, it is Jesus properly interpreting his situation. How does Psalm 22 end? Do you know? It starts with God forsakenness, but it ends in victory! “All the ends of the earth will turn to the Lord! They will kneel before Him, for He has done it!” (Psalm 22:27,31) So Jesus is both expressing both His pain, and His hope. He is interpreting His times. He’s saying, “This will end in victory.”

This is so important. Every day—every single day—we can feel like things are falling apart. Our lives are falling apart. The world is falling apart. We look around and evil seems so strong and God’s voice is so hard to hear. But when we practice scripture, when we know the stories, we can properly interpret our times. When we see God lead Israel through the wilderness, when we see God lead Jesus through His wilderness, we can see the truth. The paths of God may lead through wilderness places, but this will end in victory.

In *The God of Weakness*, John Timmer tells this story. During the Protestant Reformation, persecutions swept over large parts of Europe. During these chaotic times, the persecuted used to hide their Bibles in cracks and crevices of their homes. They made special hiding places for their Bibles so that they could keep reading them. Some of these Bibles weren’t found until modern times. When experts examined them they made an interesting discovery. The passages spelling out God’s promises were hard to read. For some reason, these hopeful passages were smudged and faded. Eventually they figured out the reason for the smudges. It was tears. In their trouble, these people read these passages again and again. As they read, they wept, and their tears fell on the pages. It got them through. When we practice scripture, it helps us to properly interpret our times.

Final point. Jesus uses the Bible to understand His mission. That’s not something you see directly in this passage, but you see it other places. In Luke 4 for example, Jesus gets up at a synagogue and reads from Isaiah 61. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me! He has sent me to preach good news to the poor and recovery of sight to the blind! To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor!” Then He says “Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” This is why I’m here! This is what I’m called to do! This scripture tells you my mission! In Matthew 26 before His crucifixion, when His earthly work is just about completed, Jesus tells the crowd, “These things have happened so that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled.” Jesus sees His mission as the mission of Scripture. Scripture points His life. Scripture vectors His life. And so it is with us. Out there we experience opposition. We are bombarded with messages that want to vector our life in different directions. Towards self-preservation or towards pleasure seeking. But when we practice scripture, when we read it and let it seep into our bones, the Holy Spirit uses it to cut through the noise and helps us seek first the kingdom and His righteousness.

Tony Campolo tells the story of something an Orthodox bishop did during WW2. His name was Metropolitan Cyril. He was a bishop in Bulgaria. Bulgaria allied itself with Germany during that war, and so by 1943, the Jews in that country were targeted for deportation to Treblinka, a camp where almost a million Jews were exterminated. Cyril heard that a train was leaving from his town filled with hundreds of Jews, and he acted boldly and immediately. He got 300 regular church members, and he walked down to the train station to where the train was scheduled to leave. He walked right up, through the guns of the Nazi soldiers, wearing his

bishop's robes. He and his congregants ignored the guns of the SS officers pointed at them, and he walked up to the train and banged on the doors of the boxcars demanding that they be opened. As he banged he shouted, "Wherever you go, I will go. Your people will be my people. Your God will be my God!" You recognize that, right? It's Scripture. Those are the words Gentile Ruth spoke to Naomi on the road to Bethlehem. The Holy Spirit has woven this scripture so deeply into the life of this man that in the middle of the threat and chaos, he knew what he was called to do. Because of his courage, the Jews were released and his act set off a chain of events that made Bulgaria one of the few countries in Eastern Europe where the number of Jews actually increased during the war. When we practice scripture, the Spirit teaches us our mission. May the Lord keep us faithful in our practices, because His practices are the way of life. As we do this work let's also remember: The most important practices of Jesus are not the practices we do for Him, but the practices HE does for us. Our whole life we try to make the robe of our righteousness, and we never quite get it. But at the end of life we lay our ragged cloak aside, and Christ clothes us in the perfect robe of His righteousness. May we pursue our practices in the light of that great hope.

© Rev. Peter Jonker