

Paul and the Bible
2 Tim. 3:10-1
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I teach our Pastor's Class every year, which prepares our fifth-graders to make the decision about whether or not they are ready to be baptized. We spend one full class on the Bible, and in that class we play a game called, "Does the Bible really say that?" I read some statements and then the youth have to decide if they are really in the Bible or not. How many they get wrong determines how long I hold them under during their baptism. For example, "After surviving the flood, Noah gets in trouble with God by getting drunk and naked." In the Bible. "In a moment of selfishness, Moses demands that the Israelites call him 'Big Mo'." Not in the Bible. "When editing the 10 commandments, God decides to add an 11th which says, 'Thou shalt use your turn signal'." Should have been in the Bible.

So what about statements like this: "Women should be silent in church." "Slaves, obey your masters." "Wives, submit to your husbands." Yep, all in the Bible and all spoken by Paul. In this sermon series, we've spent some time with each of those statements, trying to reconcile their prejudiced, exclusionary perspective with the fact they are in the Bible. What do you do when the Bible says something with which you fundamentally disagree? And what about when that person isn't Jesus – because you can't really disagree with him – but Paul, a flawed human who's cultural location in the 1st century makes his words sound grating and offensive in the 21st century?

One summer during seminary, I decided to take a class called "The Theology of Paul," meticulously chosen by me for one important reason: it only required one book. One book for a seminary class? Hoo boy! I hit the summer-class jackpot. The book was "The Theology of Paul the Apostle," written by James D.G. Dunn. Always beware of a book when the author has two middle initials. The book clocked in at 737 pages (808 if you include the index and bibliography). Even the Bible looked at this book and said, "Wow, that's a lot of pages." We slogged through the nine chapters and 25 sub-chapters of the book, each of us drilling deeper down into Paul's writings and most times coming back up with nothing but confused looks and sore backs. I've taken the class, I've read the book, but I still don't know if I understand Paul.

And that's a bit of a problem when you consider what a huge influence Paul has on our faith. Our primary source of knowledge, inspiration and authority is the Bible, and for Christians our focus is in the section we call the New Testament. The New Testament contains 27 books: four narratives about the life of Jesus we call the Gospels, one history book about the beginning of the church, which is Acts, and then a collection of letters written to churches or individuals. Oh, and then there's Revelation. I'll let Trish explain that one.

There are a total of 21 letters in the New Testament. We know the authors of some of them because of the book's name: Jude was written by Jude, James was written by James, and the three letters of John were written by...Gary. OK, it was actually John. Take those out and that leaves 14 letters. One of those, the book of Hebrews, has an unknown author. The other 13 letters? Although this has been argued and debated and then, for good measure, argued and debated some more, the prevailing belief is that all 13 can be attributed either directly or indirectly to one person: Paul. So almost half of the letters in the Christian part of the most sacred book of all time were written or at least influenced by Paul. And a majority of the book of Acts is about Paul's conversion and missionary work. That's 14 out of 27 books. Next to Jesus,

Paul has had the most profound influence on the development of the Christian faith for over 2000 years.

Which makes me feel like a real heel when I say...I don't like him. We ministers have a saying when we hear something insightful or astute: "That'll preach." Well, for me, a lot what Paul has to say won't preach, so I don't preach it. But that's not right. Just because I struggle with Paul doesn't mean I can choose to cut him out of the Bible. Wouldn't that be nice, to go through the Bible with scissors, cutting out the parts that rubbed us the wrong way or challenged us or hit a little too close to home? All we'd be left with is the Holy Pamphlet. Some other people like to take one or two of Paul's statements, take them out of their context, and lift them up as if they apply to everybody everywhere for all time. Doing that is just as bad as ignoring Paul all together.

That's the decision that faces us each time we turn to scripture. We either trust that what we have in the Bible is what God intended for us to have, or we scrap the whole thing. If we're going to accept scripture as authoritative for our faith, then we have to be willing to accept it all, even the parts we don't like. And since Paul is such a major part of the Bible, I figure I might as well get comfortable with him, or at least try to be on speaking terms. But for Paul and I to have a conversation, we both have to be speaking the same cultural language.

When I was in Alaska a few years ago, I had a free day, so I was walking around the town of Talkeetna when I saw a sign for ziplining. "What fun!" I thought, conveniently forgetting I was terrified of heights. I signed up and made my way to the ziplining course, which promised spectacular views of the Alaskan wilderness and Denali. I never saw either of those because I had my eyes closed the whole time. The last zipline was the longest, a ride from one platform, across a beautiful lake – or so I was told – to another platform several hundred yards away. When my time came, I gripped my harness, closed my eyes, tinkled in my pants a little, and took off across the lake.

That journey is not unlike trying to translate scripture from its original language and context into today's world. We have to take Paul's words, grab hold of them in their original context, then carry them with us as we zipline across the centuries, landing in our world today. We can't just read Paul's words and think we can apply them wholesale to our lives. The society of Paul's day was so different than ours, with different expectations, different standards, different roles for people, different understandings and applications of patriarchy and hierarchy. The Bible is a living document, and that means it must be interpreted through the lens of the current context in order to speak a fresh word to its listeners. We have to do the work of reading Paul's words on his side of the zipline and interpreting them for our side of the zipline.

Paul wasn't writing his letters with the idea that one day they would be included in the best-selling book of all time and would be treated as sacred and holy. He was just firing off the first-century version of an email to a group of friends. Paul's letters were written to particular individuals and communities, addressing specific topics and issues. Many of them are reactions to something that has happened or advice columns for the work of ministry. So to understand the letters, we have to understand the contexts behind them. If we fail to do that, we do Paul a grave injustice and run the risk of misusing his words.

And unfortunately, that's exactly what's happened for centuries. People have lifted Paul's words out of their context and applied them to just about any situation you can think of and then said, "See? I'm right! The Bible says so!" This is why scripture has to be studied and interpreted, especially what Paul has to say. Paul's letters are one person's perspective on how to live out our

faith in Jesus Christ. And these letters are only some of what he wrote. Who knows how his perspectives and interpretations changed with subsequent letters.

Paul was simply a man. A great man of faith, a prolific writer, the best evangelist the church has ever had, but still human. So I believe we must treat his writings as the inspired words of an incredibly faithful and zealous man of God. There is truth in everything Paul wrote, but sometimes we have to do the hard work of understanding the context and situation and author's intentions in order to get to that truth. We're not going to like everything Paul has to say, and while we should accept it as part of the Bible, we don't have to agree with it. In fact, I believe it is in the arguing with Paul that our faith grows deeper and stronger.

We can trust that somewhere in between what Paul says and what we hear is the Holy Spirit, helping us to bridge the gap and open our hearts to receive what God has for us. Yes, Paul can be problematic. So can the rest of the Bible. But so can life, usually on a daily basis. And I believe the Bible has a lot to say about how to deal with life, and our lives help us understand and apply the Bible. Those two things – our lives and the Bible – have to be in conversation with each other. We can't do this by ourselves. We need God's guidance and inspiration and challenge. That's what the Bible is for.

So, that means we have to read it, even the parts we don't like. I'm not talking about meditating over a genealogy, I'm talking about wrestling with the parts of the Bible that challenge us. If we don't believe women should be silent in church, if we don't believe Paul was condoning slavery, if we don't believe Paul was encouraging wifely subservience, then what was Paul doing? And what does that mean for us? We have to do that work, or else the Bible is a nothing more than an ancient "Chicken Soup for the Soul" that we can pull out when we need a little inspiration but otherwise has no bearing on our lives. I love hearing the Christmas story and I loathe some of what Paul says. But I need both to help me make sense of my life and who God is calling me to be.

I pray we are courageous enough to read the Bible on a regular basis. Start with a daily devotional, one passage at a time. You'll be amazed at how relevant the Bible can be for our world today. Yes, even Paul. I pray Paul speaks to us, and I pray we have the ears – and the hearts – to listen. If we do, we just might discover a word from God. We still might not understand it, but that doesn't mean we've failed. We will only fail if we don't listen at all.