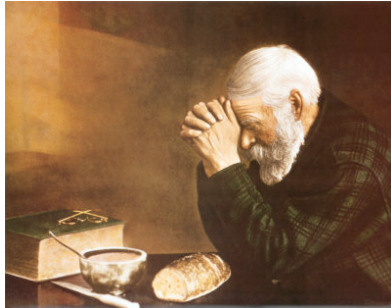


Engaging the Scriptures in Community



How many of you have seen this picture? I'm sure many of you have. It is sort of a classic. When I look at this picture I see a person of deep personal devotion. He appears to be giving thanks for the food before him both physical and spiritual - you can see the Bible there on the table before the man.

Personally, I like this picture. It causes me to want to pray, "God, make me a person who is hungry for you.

Help me to be someone who seeks you earnestly." And so that is a good thing.

Now, we certainly need to be spending time with the Lord in the way that this picture suggests. But our pursuit of God must not be ONLY an individual pursuit. Our pursuit of God is something that we were designed to do in community.

This is certainly true when it comes to how we engage the Scriptures. If we only engage the Scriptures individually there can be real danger there. If we don't let the community of believers around us, and the community of believers through history, help inform how we understand the Scriptures; we are in a very dangerous place. Left to ourselves, we will come to the Word with our own biases and look at it through our own interpretive lens that has been shaped by our cultural background, our families, and many other factors such that we may not rightly understand God's Word. But if we engage the Scriptures in community, our biases and assumptions can be brought into the light and be appropriately examined and challenged and even changed where they need to be.

And so this morning we want to look at what it looks like to engage the Scriptures in community. We are continuing our series on the Word. We've been looking at some of the means of how we receive the Scriptures. Means are the things that we do to engage and receive the Scripture into our life. The point we want to look at this morning is the importance of engaging and receiving the Scriptures in community. Even though we can and should receive Scripture individually, which is exactly what we have been talking about over the past few weeks, we also need to engage the Scripture in community with others.

As you read through the whole of the Scriptures, it is overwhelmingly clear that God has designed it to work this way. And so this morning, I want to look at a couple of ways in which we can engage the Scriptures in community. One way that God intends for us to receive Scripture in community is through teachers.

I. God Intends for Us to Receive Scripture through Teachers

This is seen throughout all of biblical history - both Old and New Testaments. One of the first teachers God gave was Moses. Moses said about himself to the children of Is-

rael in Deuteronomy 4:5:

⁵ *“See, I have taught you statutes and judgments just as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do thus in the land where you are entering to possess it. ⁶ “So keep and do them, . . .*

Moses taught the statutes and judgments of God.

Aaron, Moses’ brother, was also appointed to teach. In Leviticus 10:8-11 it says:

⁸ *The Lord then spoke to Aaron, saying, ⁹ “Do not drink wine or strong drink, neither you nor your sons with you, when you come into the tent of meeting, so that you will not die . . . ¹¹ and so as to teach the sons of Israel all the statutes which the Lord has spoken to them through Moses.”*

In this passage the Lord is giving instructions to Aaron and to his sons. Aaron and his sons, as priests, were to teach the sons of Israel all the statutes which the Lord had spoken to them through Moses. Scripture had been revealed through Moses, but there was a need for teachers. Priests were called to carry out this function.

Malachi 2:7 says this about what a good priest does:

⁷ *“For the lips of a priest should preserve knowledge, and men should seek instruction from his mouth; for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts.*

In addition to the priests, God also sent prophets to teach. In Deuteronomy 18:18 Moses recounts what God had said to him:

¹⁸ *‘I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.*

Daniel, who was one of these prophets centuries later, prayed this in Daniel 9:

⁵ *we have sinned, committed iniquity, acted wickedly and rebelled, even turning aside from Your commandments and ordinances. . . nor have we obeyed the voice of the Lord our God, to walk in His teachings which He set before us through His servants the prophets.*

God set His teachings before the people through the prophets. Throughout the Old Testament, God sent both prophets and priests to communicate His truth to Israel.

The same thing continues in the New Testament. Learning continues to happen in community as God continues to send teachers to His people. Jesus came as a teacher. In Matthew 4:23 it says:

²³ *Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom . . .*

At the end of His earthly ministry, Jesus commissioned his disciples to teach. In Acts 2:42 it says this about the church:

⁴² *They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*

The idea of engaging the Scriptures in community is really clear in this passage. The people came with an eagerness to learn. They were devoted to the teaching that they were receiving. And it was something that they did corporately as they gathered together *continually*.

And as you read through the early history of the church in Acts you continue to see called and gifted teachers sent to the church. Paul says about himself in 2 Timothy 1:11:

¹¹ *. . . I was appointed a preacher and an apostle and a teacher.*

And so that's what he did. For instance in Acts 18:11 when Paul was in Corinth it says:

¹¹ *And he settled there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.*

One of the emphases in Paul's ministry was putting in place leadership in local churches that would continue to teach God's truth to local churches. We see this in his words of encouragement to the Timothy in 1 Timothy 4. Paul said:

¹³ *Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching.*

You also see this emphasis in the qualifications that Paul communicated for those who would lead as elders in a local church. In 1 Timothy 3:2 He says:

² *An overseer, then, must be . . . able to teach,*

Finally, one of the most explicit statements about the point I'm making is in Ephesians 4, in which Paul lays out his theology of how the church is to function. He says:

¹¹ *And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers,* ¹² *for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ;* ¹³ *until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to*

the fullness of Christ.

There are four roles listed here that have a kind of teaching/equipping role. The last one is, *pastors and teachers*, which in the original language refers to one role. It is a role that functions in a local church to help equip and bring believers to maturity in part by teaching the Scriptures.

Paul also says elsewhere that there is a spiritual gift of teaching that God gives to some to help build up the body of Christ (Rom. 12:7 and 1 Cor. 12:28). People with the gift of teaching are able through the grace of God to understand and then teach the Word in such a way that people understand God's Word and are helped to apply it.

That's a pretty quick flyover of the Scriptures, but I think the principle is clear: God intends for us to receive Scripture through teachers. This is simply how God has designed the learning process to go throughout biblical history. It worked that way in the Old Testament. It worked that way in the New Testament. And that is how it works today. God never intended for us to think, "All I need is me and my Bible." Rather, we are to engage the Scriptures in community as we receive teaching by gifted people. This is one of the means through which we are to engage the Word.

Application: That's exactly the opportunity that we have when we gather here on Sunday mornings. Sometimes we can just come because this is what we do on Sundays. But we need to see that this is one of the means that God has given us to engage the Scriptures. And to get the most out of this means, we would do well to have the attitude that we saw in the Acts 2 passage earlier where the church was continually devoting themselves to the teaching.

Now, it's not only those who stand up here on Sunday mornings who have the gift of teaching. There are others who have the gift of teaching and use that gift in other contexts. For some people it might be in a Sunday school class or in a smaller group or through more one-to-one mentoring. These too are people who God intends to use in our lives to help us engage the Scriptures.

Beyond the context of the local church, God also sends gifted people who have a ministry among the larger church. There are gifted people who teach through books, podcasts, commentaries and other such means. These teachers can be of great benefit to us as well.

But here's my comment about seeking any teacher. You need to make sure that you are under teachers who are truly seeking God. One of the things that happened in the nation of Israel that led them astray was when the prophets and priests at times stopped truly seeking God and stopped being teachers who represented God.

I don't remember who said this to me, but when I was trying to figure out what seminary I was going to attend, someone told me, "Be careful about who you let play with your mind." The point was that the people I sat under in seminary would shape my mind.

And so I needed to make sure it was people I could trust. That is true for us as we seek out teachers as well. We need to make sure that our teachers truly are seeking to be faithful to God and to the Scriptures, because they will mess with our minds. And that's a good thing if it is the right teachers.

Here's one last comment about learning from teachers. There are no infallible teachers. Steve and I try our hardest to understand the Scriptures that we are teaching and to discern rightly what God might want to say to us as a church, but that doesn't mean that we never make a mistake. There is a verse in Acts that is really helpful here. Acts 17:11 says about the Berean believers:

¹¹ Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.

The Berean believers were commended for checking to see if what their teacher taught was true and their teacher was the apostle Paul himself. If that was a good thing for them to do, don't you think it might be important for us too?

God intends for us to receive Scripture through teachers. This is one of the ways that we are to engage the Scriptures in community. But there is also another way in which we are to engage the Scriptures in community and that is:

I. God's Intends for Us to Receive Scripture through One Another

In addition to the more formal roles and callings that some have to be teachers in the body of Christ there is also to be a kind of mutual learning and wrestling with the Scriptures that is to take place in community. Last Sunday one of the passages that we looked at was Colossians 3:16, which says:

¹⁶ Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

The focus of Steve's message last week was that we need to be the kind of people who are allowing God's Word to go deep within us. He talked about how having a reflective approach to Scripture allows the Scripture to richly dwell within us SO THAT we are able to do what Colossians 3:16 says. We are able to teach and admonish one another.

You see this same idea in the passage that we looked at earlier in Ephesians 4. That was the passage that said he gave some to be pastors and teachers for the equipping of the saints. A couple of verses later it says, speaking to all of us:

¹⁵ but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, being fitted

and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

Part of the *proper working of each individual part* is that we speak the truth to one another in love. The body of Christ builds itself up when there is this mutual edification process that takes place. God wants to use us in the lives of each other to speak truth. God wants us to gain spiritual insight from each other.

And so, yes, there are gifted teachers that we need in our lives. We need to receive from them. But we also need to be teaching one another through our interactions. We need to be living in relationship with at least some others in such a way that we are interacting over and receiving truth from them. This isn't a formal thing; it's more of a way-of-life kind of thing.

There are a couple of questions that I want to ask you related to this second point. The first is this: Are you living in relationship with some others in such a way that this is taking place in your life? We can't really receive Scripture from one another if we are not relationally connected to each other. And so are you connected to at least some people such that this is taking place? If your only connection to other believers is showing up on Sunday morning, it is going to be hard to have this kind of interaction. For this to happen, you are going to have to be more deeply connected to at least a few.

There are a lot of ways this can happen. There isn't just one formula for how this works. This key is to simply seek to develop relationships with a few other believers that are growing in depth. This is one of the reasons that we have Life Groups. Our hope is that these would be places that can help foster these kinds of relationships. Life Groups themselves are places where this mutual teaching takes place, but a lot of time what happens is that someone joins a Life Group and then finds another person in that group with whom he or she clicks and they begin to connect outside that group - maybe grabbing coffee once in a while. And in that relationship deeper things begin to happen; one of which is this mutual teaching.

For years I have always had a couple of other men that I get with regularly because I want them to be speaking truth into my life. This is a critical thing for me. Do you have these kinds of relationships? That's the first question.

Here's the second question: Are you becoming the kind of person in which the Word of Christ is dwelling deeply? If what we are talking about is a mutual thing that means that you can't always be on the receiving end of the equation. Sometimes God is going to want to use you in the life of someone else. And doesn't it make sense that this is going to happen best as you are personally being shaped by the Word and letting it dwell more and more deeply within you? There is more at stake than just your own spiritual life when it comes to how you are engaging the Scriptures.

God intends that we engage the Scriptures in community. We need to be receiving the

Scripture through teachers. Praise God that He gives some the gift of teaching so that we can learn through them. But God also intends that we receive the Word through one another.



I put that picture up a little earlier of the lone man sitting and praying at the table. Let me put up another picture that I think is a another good picture of how God designed that we would engage His Word.

The way we best get a handle on his Word is when we are grabbing a hold of the Scriptures with a community of people. Some of them need to be gifted teachers. But many of them just need to be a community of people around us with whom we are wrestling together over the meaning and the significance of the Bible in our lives. We need to be engaging the Scriptures in community.

Amen.