

INSTRUCTION DEFICIT
(Failure to Read the Instructions)

We are talking about the basic commitments of the Christian Path or Way. Last week was prayer. This week is THE BIBLE. Remember, this is not supposed to turn into an exercise in guilt-tripping. Nobody does it all. Most of you do more than you think. This is a series about the basic – meaning, the most helpful – commitments for getting on, and staying on, the Christian Path and growing in the Christian Life. We are not trying to save ourselves – meaning, get good enough for God to care about us. We are only trying to respond to the realization that God in Christ Jesus has made it incredibly clear that God *does* care about us.

Last week, you heard me say that prayer is more important than the Bible. That is true. Spirit outranks Scripture. God is more important than the book about God.

In my own opinion – and I never assume that you have to agree with my perspective – there are lots of places today where the Bible is being worshipped as if it were God, and even to the neglect of God. I believe that is called “idolatry” – the worship of a “thing” instead of a relationship with the living God. Strange and recent doctrines are being taught about the Bible being inerrant – perfect – without any errors or mistakes in it. By the way, the Early Fathers challenged, debated, and argued over our New Testament writings with eager interest. But if you had tried to tell them that these writings were inerrant or perfect in some way, they would have thought you were nuts. Now some people are trying to tell us that anything and everything in the Bible is beyond challenge or question: Don’t even try to understand – just hold your nose and swallow. If you read it, believe it, and get it right, you will be saved. And never mind understanding any of it – just believe it. Presto chango, we have a new savior – the Bible. And indeed it is a savior much clearer, less troubling, and ever so much less personal and caring than Jesus.

If you look closely at these doctrines, you will see that the Incarnation and Love and the Cross are really just seen as formulas. “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” It is all neat and tidy and clear, and you can fit it into a four-page pamphlet. Besides, nothing Christian should ever go deeper than a twenty-minute sermon on a Sunday morning (mixed with lots of jokes and inane platitudes.)

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Some people tell me I shouldn't be so sarcastic. Well, Jesus was more sarcastic than I am capable of being (He was always very good at what He did). Paul had a bit of a nip in some of his remarks too. I love the Bible as much as any person you have ever known. I just hate it that in so many places in our time, it has been turned into a mindless insult. If we think we have God all figured out, that is insulting! Both to God and to us.

A couple of men found themselves sitting together on an airplane bound from New York to Los Angeles. After a while, one man put down his newspaper and decided to try a conversation. Before long it came to the inevitable question: "What is your profession?" His companion replied, "I'm a minister." There was a pause. Finally the first man said, "You know, as far as I'm concerned, all religion can be summed up in the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Another pause. Then finally from the other: "And what is your profession?" "Oh, I'm an astronomer. It's an incredibly exciting field in our time." "Well," said his companion, "as far as I'm concerned, all astronomy can be summed up in that profound phrase: Twinkle, twinkle, little star."

Doubtless those who teach inerrancy and simplex formulas for salvation or damnation are only trying to encourage greater faith and give the Bible greater authority so that more people will come to believe. But falsehood drives some of us away, however much it may comfort the ignorant. If we have a book we cannot question, we also have a book from which we cannot learn. If you think there is any possibility of the Bible being inerrant or coming to us straight from God without possibility of human error or human misunderstanding or human perspective, you lack important information about how the Bible came to be.

When Paul wrote to his friends in Corinth – some of them quite contentious – did he have the remotest notion that his letters would end up being canonized as Scripture? Up in Heaven, Paul still apologizes to Jesus every morning for that crack about women keeping silent in the church. We only have translations of copies of copies of copies of what people wrote. Nowhere in the world is there an original text of any biblical writing. Not even close! So even if Paul *were* sinless, perfect, and incapable of changing his mind about something, we would still not have an "inerrant" Scripture. In fact, by his own word, Paul was not sinless. I am always eager to hear what he had to say about anything,

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but I would be silly indeed to assume that he was right about everything – any more than I assume that you are right about everything or that I am right about everything. I happen to believe that Paul was growing and learning all the time. In fact, he had a fierce learning curve. And that means that what he wrote in A.D. 48 will not match up perfectly with what he wrote in A.D. 60. Twelve years of prayer and experience and working with different churches gave him new perspective. Either that or he was brain-dead. So which is inerrant: the letter to the Thessalonians, or the letter to the Romans? Or maybe the book of James, which disagrees with most everything Paul believed or wrote?

In any case, you heard me say that prayer is more important than the Bible. What none of you heard me say – what nobody has ever heard me say – is that the Bible is not important. I do not know anything in this broken realm that is perfect. Therefore, the Bible does not have to be perfect for me to honor, revere, and study it with earnest and grateful attention. I am even grateful for the errors and inner inconsistencies because they are proof of authenticity, and because they teach us many things.

So with all the magic and superstition set aside, we have in the Bible the essence of all the written records the faith community has considered most authentic and most helpful regarding what happened, how it happened, and what it means to us. That does *not* answer all our questions or solve all our problems. Sorry! But it is wonderful common ground from which we can learn and grow and be pilgrims on the WAY together.

Are we better Americans if we know nothing of the Constitution, or the Declaration of Independence, or the Gettysburg Address, or Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address? The parallels between a nation that no longer remembers its heritage and a church that no longer studies the Bible are shocking. The issues and the urgency are compelling, even self-evident (to borrow a phrase).

So we do not have to jump up and down, wave magic wands, or threaten anybody with extra or unusual hells. The truth is clear and simple: If we want to preserve the Union and our way of life, we better know and keep pondering our roots – where we came from – and what it means in our present situation and to our present ways and goals. Ditto the Christian Faith and what it means to BE the church. Not just to GO

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to church (that's pathetic), but to BE the church in our time, as those who came before us WERE "the church" in theirs.

And so: Though the Spirit outranks Scripture, not much else does. At least not for Christians. But what always amazes me is that so many churchgoers in our time know so little about the Bible. That's scandalous! Wouldn't you think that one thing we could be absolutely sure of is that every member of a Christian church would own a Bible and read it every day? If you were an outsider and heard about an organization of Christians who were serious about their faith, isn't that one thing you would expect to be true of every member? It might scatter from there; the members would be doing quite an array of different things as they felt drawn or called to them. But at least you would expect that all of them would pray every day, and that all of them would read their Bibles every day. Two basic commitments of the Christian Life: keep reporting in, and read the manual.

It is one of the characteristics of conservative Christianity that its people read the Bible and quote the Bible constantly. From my perspective, they do not always know very much about what it means. They quote it constantly as if that were a sufficient excuse for some very ridiculous and very unChristian opinions. They are told ahead of time what it means, and then are instructed to memorize some passages to support that meaning. Quite often it feels like a wooden recitation rather than a living dialogue. "You have to do this. Hebrews 13:8." Like that says it all, end of discussion. I usually turn to a friend and say, "Genesis 22:5." (*"You stay here with the ass; I'm going on ahead."*)

In any case, it is not enough to know that Adam and Eve ate the apple. It is also important to know that it was not an apple – it was the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And we must know that "Adam" means all mankind, in every age. And that the story means we have all been given free will – and that once we have it, we rebel against God and run our lives in our own way and apart from God. It is important to realize that God knew this would happen – that it was necessary, and that we were created this way on purpose because otherwise God would end up with robots instead of human beings able to choose and capable of love. It is even important to know that Jesus Christ came to reverse the curses of our being thrown out of the Garden. He came so that we could finally use our free will to turn again and choose God

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on purpose – to repent and turn toward HOME. And if you know anything about life, you know that we cannot do that unaided or all by ourselves just because we finally realize we need and want to. We need a Savior! (But hey, we never get everything from only one story ...) That is a far cry from the usual “Eve ate the apple and they had sex, and you shouldn’t.” If that is all you want from the Bible, far better not to read it at all.

Well, conservative Christians have their problems – and we have ours. In the last fifty years, it has become one of the characteristics of liberal Christianity that its people are biblically illiterate. It is not because they cannot read; they are highly educated in other ways and in other fields. They simply do not read or study *the Bible*. And it is not an exaggeration to call them biblically illiterate.

As an aside, but not very far aside: The vast majority of liberal Christians are afraid to engage conservative Christians in serious conversation about the Faith because they think that the conservatives know their Bibles, and they know that they themselves do not. Who suffers for this? Jesus! He comes off looking more like Satan than Satan himself. He loses endless potential followers who want nothing to do with a Savior who delights in throwing thousands into the burning fires of Hell. And where are His friends, who should know better yet are afraid to stand up for Him? Perhaps on the inside they know better, but they do not read their Bibles enough to be able to say so with any conviction or authority. So they let others tell the world about Jesus and His Kingdom, what it is like, and what it is all about. And they let them tell it wrong.

In our denomination – the United Church of Christ (Congregational), the so-called “mainline” wing of Christendom – over ninety percent of our churches have no Bible Study groups whatsoever. And it shows. It is the same in most liberal denominations. Over the last fifty years, church leadership has learned to push programs, not Christian Life. (Just one more variation on the ancient theme: Back to the Law – forget the Gospel.) Of course, the programs dry up after a while, because spiritual growth and life with Jesus are what inspire and energize us. So, not everywhere, but in general, we are dying across the land. Apparently most members of liberal churches think the Bible is optional, or a side show, or a hobby for those who like that sort of thing. I am not scolding, just describing. As always, if we cannot admit our true condition, we cannot repent – cannot change – cannot go beyond where we are.

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So please do not be embarrassed, but indulge me in a little foray into honesty. Nobody is going to remember how you respond; they will be too busy thinking about themselves. Besides, we are a faith family – we do not have to pretend any perfection with each other. The second greatest barrier to adults learning about the Bible is their fear of looking foolish because they do not already know the Bible better. All of you will know, after today, that you need never be embarrassed about your knowledge of the Bible. If you ever want to get into a class or study group, you will be with lots of others who are just getting started. So let it be what it is – maybe even interesting, and in-family fun.

Okay: Gently, calmly, honestly ... so we know where we really are – bearing in mind that I might call upon you to prove it – will each of you who can name all ten of the Ten Commandments please raise your hand. The Ten Commandments are the core of the Old Covenant, of course, apart from which we have no chance of understanding the New Covenant. Now, will those of you who can name all of the Beatitudes please raise your hand or keep your hand raised. The Beatitudes are the core of the New Covenant, or at least the summation of what Jesus came to teach us. Next: How many of you know for sure whether Elijah came before or after King David? How many of you have read the Bible from cover to cover at least once in your life? How many of you like the Book of Hezekiah?

Let's see if we can get more hands in the air. How many of you know for sure which book of the Bible tells about Jesus being born in a manger? How many of you know who built Noah's ark? (The correct answer is probably Shem, Ham, and Japheth, but I will accept Noah.) I am very appreciative of your patience in this. Thank you. [Hands down.] They say a picture is worth a thousand words, and while we might not all draw the same conclusions from what we have just seen, it has nevertheless saved me thousands of words. You can at least be grateful for that!

Now, with one exception, these were not trick questions. These were not obscure or minor categories. My point is that this was not an IQ test. It did not separate the good people from the bad people. It was clearly and simply an indication of exposure. Many people simply have not spent very much time with the Bible. It is not that they have rejected it; they do not know it well enough to do that. "You can't get a divorce if you ain't never been married." Many people have never been properly introduced to the Bible, never mind courted it or fallen in love with it. Whose fault

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is that? I'm not sure, but I blame the leaders of the church. The liberal church has been so busy with other things for the last fifty years, it has taken very little time to teach its people the Bible. Our children have grown up with the barest smatterings of biblical knowledge, and now many of *us* are those children. So we get further and further away from the only objective source of our Faith. It is a major instruction deficit. We do not read the manual anymore, or study the instructions. And everywhere in the liberal church today, we are living with assumptions and claims that are wrong, ludicrous, and even dangerous – because we have stopped reading OUR BOOK. Here are just a few of those false assumptions:

- If you do good, everybody will love you ...
- All religions are the same ...
- Jesus teaches inclusivity and unconditional love ...
- Nobody who is rich is truly Christian ...
- It doesn't matter if you are conscientious, honest, dependable, care about your family, and are loyal to your friends – the only thing that matters is how much you give to the poor ...
- All Christians are supposed to forgive everybody because God has forgiven them ...

If you believe any of these things, you have paid no attention to the story of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament. Who makes up this tripe?! It did *not* come from the Bible. It's a good book – you should read it sometime.

This instruction deficit has resulted in a growing anarchy within the churches. We no longer speak a common language or share a common source. More and more, we each “make it up” as we go. Then we are unable to help each other along the Path, grow in the Faith ourselves, or check our opinions and prejudices against those who have walked the Way before us. So we rave about the great virtues of diversity, yet keep getting more isolated and lonely all the time. Diversity is not the goal, it is the situation; it takes no great skill or genius to disagree. It is the bond of God's love in Christ Jesus that draws us together *despite* our differences. *That* is the goal. *That* is the hope. We are not here to brag about our differences – we are here to celebrate a love that is *bigger than* our differences.

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Today the liberal church is looking more and more like many American families. They seldom sit down to a common meal, and when they do, instead of saying grace they chant: “Isn’t it wonderful that none of us can ever agree on anything ... that we don’t like to do anything together ... that we have no common cause ... and in fact, that we don’t even like each other! But of course we are very loving people – we love vague and general humanity *out there* somewhere, people we will never see or meet.” Up-close love gets much too demanding – too messy and sticky.

If you are a Christian – if you want to walk the Christian Way, grow in understanding, make progress on the spiritual Path – one of the basic commitments you can make is the commitment to read and study some portion of the Bible every day. By the very nature of the culture and time in which we live, we are all being bombarded every day, all day long, with attitudes, appeals, information, causes, and beliefs that are not Christian – that do not honor God or care about God’s Kingdom. If we do not find some way to counter this constant barrage, we will not stay on the Path for very long. Reading the Bible every day is one way to do that.

We walk along and the days get busy, there are too many demands, there is too much pressure, and the values are out of kilter in some places. No matter who we are or how strong, staying in that atmosphere all the time starts to get to us. If we have a commitment to read the Bible – that is, sometime during the day (whether we feel like it or not, or have the time or not) we open it to read a chapter or two – then even a few verses can call us back to who we are and what we really care about. If we are committed to a different Way, it does not take much to remind us of it – but how refreshing and helpful is that reminder.

In addition, a daily habit of reading the Bible will help us grow more familiar with the common language of Christians. Every group of any significance has its in-group language. It is not only fun and a common bond, it saves enormous time and confusion in communication. “I think she just walked the Damascus Road.” “Send it into the pigs.” “Maybe you forgot the mantle.” “Have you been to the wilderness with it?” “I’ve been hearing the rooster crowing.” “He’s acting like the Elder Brother on this one.” It would take me two hours to explain the dimensions and implications of just those few phrases. Yet every Christian should be able to pick up all two hours in the few seconds it takes to say them. It is our common language – our code.

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Some of you may be noticing, even with alarm, that I am staying away from the more important statements: The Bible is the Word of God. The Bible is holy and sacred. The Bible is our canon scripture. (“Canon” means “measuring rod,” by the way – that against which we measure all other things.)

I believe these things are true. But if *you* believed these things, you would already be reading the Bible every day. So why would I start out with what I know you do not really believe? My hope is that if I can get more of you to start reading and studying the Bible every day, then maybe you will come to such conclusions for yourselves. What I *am* telling you, and what I can promise you, is that if you make a serious commitment to read and study the Bible every day, over time it will make a huge difference in your spiritual life. It will help you to keep walking the Christian Way, and it will make a big difference in how much you grow and learn along the Way. If you want progress on the Path, patient but steady Bible Study is one of the time-tested and best-documented ways to get it. It is also true that the Bible is one of those rare books that gets more and more exciting the more you read it.

So for the moment, never mind all the highest and best claims and conclusions. But know this: The Bible is the best and most carefully preserved record we have about the people who claim to have encountered God from about 2000 B.C. until A.D. 100. It contains the only useful records we have about the life of Jesus. Essentially, if you want to know where Christianity came from, how it got started, what it is about, or how you yourself can walk its Way, you must read and ponder the Bible – and talk to others who read and ponder the Bible. Then the Bible becomes a Living Word, and you yourself get built into the ongoing story when you also begin to pray. I think we mentioned prayer last week.

It needs to be mentioned that reading the Bible devotionally every day is not enough. It is also important to *study* the Bible: to share with others what you are understanding, to listen to what *they* are finding, and to delve into the context, the tradition, and the background. I fervently hope that you will each start reading the Bible individually, and every day. But I must mention that you will not get very far – you will not make much progress – if you *only* read the Bible alone. If you study the Bible with others and also read it alone, then the benefit of both will increase exponentially. Especially if you are devout and earnest, it is

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dangerous to read the Bible without the perspective of other pilgrims. (*“And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.”* (Matthew 5:30)) It’s nice to have other sincere pilgrims to consult with before doing anything brash. God will cause you problems enough, if you are serious about following the Way. But the Way itself is intended for community, and without the perspective of Christian friends and the wisdom of our past experience and traditions, it is easy to become fixated on items that can sidetrack us, sometimes with serious consequences.

To be clear then, this commitment about the Bible has two parts. You can, of course, commit to one or the other, or both. If you have never made the commitment to read the Bible before, here is a suggestion: Promise God that you will read two chapters six days a week – one chapter from the Old Testament, and one chapter from the New Testament. Keep it simple: Start in Genesis and Matthew and keep going, one chapter a day from each. If you stay on schedule, you will read the New Testament through a little more than twice as often as the Old Testament.

I hope, of course, that you will promise yourself to get into a Bible Study group as soon as you can make that work with your schedule. It is essential for us to read and study the Bible together, as well as alone. For those of you who cannot do that right now, maybe you can get a friend or a spouse to agree to talk with you for one hour each week so you can talk about the most interesting things you have discovered in your Bible readings that week. And you can also decide to set aside a special time once each week to read a commentary or Bible dictionary that gives a little background to one of the passages you have been reading.

Well, I know it is really strange for me to be standing in a Christian church, on a Sunday morning, urging church members to read the Bible. Down through the ages, thousands of us have lived and died for this book, or at least for the One it reveals. For all the years of the church – up to about the time of Luther – nobody had a Bible of their own. The only way to read or study it was to come to church, where you could hear it read to the gathered group. People looked forward all week to the chance to come together, and one of the big reasons was that it would allow them to hear more from the Holy Word. Now it is rare to find a household that does not have at least one Bible, and rarer still to find a household where anybody is reading it. Who could have imagined that persuading you to

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read and study the Bible would ever be necessary? It makes about as much sense as me preaching a sermon urging all of you to breathe – wondering how to convince you of the benefits of breathing in and breathing out. It should be impossible for me to prevent you from reading the Bible. It should be impossible for any person on earth to prevent you from reading the Bible. But we live in strange times.

Make the commitment to read the Bible every day. Make the commitment to get into a Bible Study group. That is the message of this sermon. When we do that, we play right into the Spirit's hands.