

WORD

11.26.06 [the heart of heartland]

[conversation]

[PRAY]

I hope everyone had a great Thanksgiving, and that you didn't eat yourself into a carbohydrate coma!

Well, in the spirit of Thanksgiving, I would like to add to your food enjoyment and quite possibly for some, your misery! As the ushers come around with the bottles of honey, if you would put some of it on one of your fingers and pass it along that would be wonderful!

But here's the thing, no matter how tantalizing it may be, no matter how tempting and delicious it is, you cannot lick it off! No instant gratification this time! You must keep it there! You must resist the urge!

Honey is so sweet, it's so thick and it's oh so good! It tastes a little bit like heaven if you ask me. It's one of those delicacies that we often times forget about... but when we're reminded of it, and when it's in front of us, it's a hard thing to resist, just take a look at that sweet, gooey goodness perched atop your fingertip. The natural sweetness, the viscosity, this wonderful thing that the honeybees create—nothing, absolutely nothing in nature compares to the goodness of honey.

We have tried countless times with all of our machines and technology to create something as good as honey, but each and every time we try, we fail to make something as good and as pure and as sweet as the honeybees. Isn't it amazing that this very thing was created completely by bees? And it's pure! It's so pure that it's completely free from any bacteria and other junk... and you can actually eat it straight off the honeycomb! It's no wonder Winnie the Pooh loved his honey! Now, don't lick it! I know you want to... but you cannot! Don't lick it!

Instruction manuals are such a pain in the neck aren't they? Every time you buy something, it inevitably comes with one of these painfully written, impossible to understand, horribly drawn out pieces of paper that you are supposed to follow from one step to the next in order to assemble the thing you just bought. And each and every time, the instructions seem to forget something important about the assembly—or better yet, one of the steps is nearly impossible to complete as it has your hands and arms contorted in directions that are anatomically impossible!

It never fails that the instructions tell you to do something in which you have to bend your arms at the elbow in the complete opposite direction than they're supposed to go!

Instruction manuals are for the birds!

In fact, most of the time we don't even follow them; we just need the picture. Sure, we may take a glance at them here or there just to make sure that we're somewhat close—

and sometimes we use it to check out why it is that we have extra pieces left over at the end, but for the most part we see instruction manuals as extremely pointless.

I don't know of many people that read the instruction manual for their car... I mean, come on did you really sit there for 3 hours reading through it before you drive off the car lot? No way! It just sits in the glove box collecting dust until you have an instrument light come on in the dash. "Uh oh..." So, we pull it out to make sure the wheels aren't going to fall off. We just don't have a great need, or use for instruction manuals, do we?

**Then why is it then that we treat the Bible this way? Why do we treat the Bible like an instruction manual, like a self-help book? It's no wonder it just sits around collecting dust until the next big crisis in our lives when we open it up, seeking out and searching for some sort of comfort or direction.

Its no wonder Scripture doesn't have any power in our lives. When we treat Scripture as an instruction manual, and as a self-help book it loses its power...and its purpose. It's no wonder that we have 4 or 5 different copies of the Bible in our homes that never see the light of day. Its no wonder that they never get used...and when we do need it, we can barely remember where we packed it away. Is this why we never bring our Bibles to church anymore—they're just self-help books for when we need them; just boring little instruction manuals that we can get by just fine without? (Unless of course the check engine light comes on!)

We'll just listen to the preacher, see what he says and then decide whether or not we agree, and go about our merry little way.

You see, the Bible is not an instruction manual. It's not "Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth", (quite possibly the worst acronym ever thought of). There is nothing basic about the Bible, which ultimately has a greater purpose than to help you and I get through life. You see, contrary to what some T.V. preachers say, the Bible is not about us—we are not the "end-all-be-all" of the Bible!

Scripture, the very word of God written by man as carried along by the Holy Spirit, is much more... it's so much more than instructions and pithy little statements. Scripture is perfect, reviving the soul. It's trustworthy and right, giving joy to the heart. It's pure and radiant, giving light to the eyes as it endures forever. It's righteous, it's precious—even more precious than gold—even the purest of gold. And yes, it's sweeter than honey, even honey from the honeycomb. This is the Bible. This is Scripture.

In ancient Israel there were three different levels of school. Kind of like how we have elementary school, high school and college—they had Bet-Sepher, Bet-Talmud, and Bet-Midrash. When the youngest of children went to Bet-Sepher at the ages of 3 or 4, the first thing the rabbi would do was to take a dab of honey and place it on the fingertips of all the children in the classroom and admonish them not to lick it. These children would have been tempted beyond compare to taste the sweetness and wonderfulness of honey. For them it was the greatest treat they could ever have, it was like unwrapping a piece of candy and placing it into the hand of a 3 year old and saying, "now don't eat it!" It would have been the hardest thing for them to resist! The rabbi would then begin reciting Psalm 19:

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the Lord are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

In doing so, by making the children wait and long for the honey, the rabbi would instill in these children the goodness, the irresistibility of the word of God.

The word of God is like honey. It's sweet to the soul, it's pure and radiant as it glows in the light. It's precious and wonderful... and yes, it's even sweeter than honey. The rabbi would then have the children "taste the goodness of God's word" and have them lick the honey off of their fingers, savoring the taste, enjoying the sweetness and pureness, and recognizing that God's word is so much better than that, so much more scrumptious, so much sweeter. So, take the honey, the sweet nectar that is perched atop your finger and lick it, savor the sweetness, the goodness, the tastiness... and while you're doing it, remember that the word of God tastes so much better than even this!

**Doesn't taste much like an instruction manual does it?

This is God's word.

Because of the sweetness and the goodness of God's Word, the Holy Scriptures, by the time the children finished Bet-Sepher, the first level of school, they had the entire Torah—Genesis through Deuteronomy, memorized. Yes, memorized. There were a bunch of little 6 year olds running around all throughout Israel spouting off the Torah from memory. Genesis through Deuteronomy—memorized. That's what happens when we see the goodness, the sweetness of Scripture and see it as something other than "Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth."

But what was it that makes the Scriptures so sweet? What is it that makes them so wonderful? I think we've lost the very purpose of Scripture as a global church—especially a church in the United States—and have turned away from the sweetness and goodness that lay within. I think that we've made many missteps and that's why all we were left with was an instruction manual, or self-help book. We stripped away much of the goodness, and were left with just a cob.

If you have your Bibles with you this morning I'd like for you to turn to the book of Matthew. If you don't have a Bible with you, just raise your hand and one of our ushers will come around and hand you one of the Blue Bibles. Matthew, chapter 5, page 683 in the Blue Bibles.

The book of Matthew is the first one in the New Testament and one of four accounts of Jesus' life on earth that make up the gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. It's a rich book that includes some amazing and miraculous things that Jesus did as well as records a lot of what Jesus said and taught to the people who followed him.

Matthew chapter 5, verse 17. Jesus is speaking here to a great throng of people that have followed him up on the side of a mountain as Jesus begins to deliver the Sermon on the Mount.

5.17, Jesus said: *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”*

Many people had begun to wonder and think aloud what Jesus was all about, especially in light of what he was teaching and preaching. In fact, many of them thought that he had come to get rid of what we call today, the Old Testament. They thought that he had come to throw it all out, banish it to irrelevance and destroy God’s very Word.

Because of the schooling that many Hebrew people undertook, they were heavily invested in God’s Word. In fact, in the second level of schooling, Bet-Talmud, the students by the time they were 10-12 years old would have the entire Talmud, or Old Testament, completely memorized! Genesis through Malachi, memorized! They were invested in the sweet nectar of God! And here they think that Jesus is getting rid of their goodness, their honey, the very word of God!

But Jesus didn’t come to get rid of God’s word rather he came to fulfill the Old Testament. Jesus was the completion of the Old Testament. So, instead of destroying or abolishing it, instead of wiping out the very words of God, he points out that he is actually the whole point of the Old Testament, he’s the whole point of Scripture! It all revolves around Him. All the pages, every last one of them, drip and ooze Jesus.

That’s why Scripture is sweeter than honey! That’s why it is purer than the most pure gold! That’s why it’s righteous and true, upright and steadfast, trustworthy and enduring! It’s all about Jesus—every last word, every last stroke of the pen revolves completely around the coming of the Messiah, Jesus.

All 39 books of the Old Testament point to the coming of Jesus. But it doesn’t stop there! All 27 letters of the New Testament were written pointing back to the fact that Jesus had come! All of Scripture, all 66 books of the Bible, drips with the sweetness the wonder and awe that is Jesus.

Everywhere you look, and everywhere you turn it’s about Jesus.

****Somehow we got away from this fact and began reading the Bible with a different lens. Instead of looking at the Bible through the lens of Jesus, we turned and began to look at it through the lens of self. We twisted and contorted the Scriptures to revolve completely around us, taking Jesus out of the subject matter and instead replacing him with ourselves. Its no wonder the Bible became so boring and dry!**

In fact Jesus spoke about this as well. In the gospel of John, just a few books to the right, page 754. Jesus said in John chapter 5, verse 39: *“You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life.”* Or basically, you study them from the lens of self, you look at them because you think they’re about you. You look at them with the wrong lens! But Jesus continues: *“These are the Scriptures*

that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.” Jesus is clear. Scripture is not about us... it’s about Him, and Him alone.

Scripture is not a step-by-step instruction manual full of “how to’s”. We don’t look for scripture to show us “how to” live, but rather we look to scripture to see “why” we live. And we live for one simple reason. Jesus. It’s when and only when we center our lives completely around Jesus that we are changed—no formula of “how to’s” will ever do that.

When we revolve our reading and study, our memorization and application of Scripture completely around Jesus to answer the questions of “why”, we will find ourselves transformed in the process. Scripture is living and active, it’s a living and breathing thing that has been breathed into life, breathed into existence by God himself. 2 Timothy 3.16 says that *“All Scripture is God-breathed...”* It’s the very same idea as in Genesis when God breathed life into Adam for the very first time. Scripture was breathed into existence by God and answers for us the “why” of life... but only when Jesus is the center, only when we keep Jesus as the focus. This is why Scripture admonishes us over and over to keep our eyes firmly fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

When we see why it is that we live, when we see who it is that we live for, our perspective is changed. If we choose to live for ourselves, our perspective revolves completely around “me” and completely around doing things to make “me” happy. We then become the “end-all-be-all” of everything. Our own pleasure becomes the ultimate goal.

If we choose to live for someone else, a spouse or a child, a love interest or a friend, they then become the center of our universe and our perspective revolves completely around them and their happiness, their joy and exuberance. They then become the “end-all-be-all” of everything and their pleasure becomes the ultimate goal.

If we choose to live for Jesus, if we choose to make him the center of our universe—and yes I’m talking to Christians here as well—then everything we do should revolve around Him and His Kingdom. It no longer becomes about us, but it becomes about Him and in the process we are changed.

We are not changed by the “how to’s,” we are changed by reorienting ourselves around Jesus completely in the “why”. When we know “why” we live, everything is changed.

I haven’t seen too many couples that have oriented themselves around the principles of “How to have a happier marriage” actually have a happier marriage. But I have seen couples that have reoriented themselves around the “why” of Jesus and have become some of the most beautiful and God-honoring marriages I’ve ever seen.

I haven’t seen too many people that have oriented themselves around the “How to’s” of living a more forgiving life actually end up being more forgiving. But I have seen people that have reoriented themselves around the “why” of Jesus become some of the most forgiving people I’ve ever met.

I haven't seen too many people that have oriented themselves around the principles of "How to get along with your neighbor, co-worker, friend" and actually get along any better than they did before. But I have seen people reorient themselves around the "why" of Jesus and become some of the most loving, generous, and gracious people.

It's all about reorienting ourselves around Jesus, and in doing so we find ourselves transformed by His love, by His grace, by His forgiveness, and by His peace. Scripture is not an instruction manual... it's something bigger, greater and grander than we give it credit for. And it's through the reading of Scripture oriented around Jesus that we find ourselves changing, and ultimately changed.

Hebrews 4.12 says: *"For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."*

If you notice the words "double-edged sword" in the text, they actually are the same idea, and in fact are the same word idea used in the Greek and Hebrew as in Joshua 5.2 for the tool used in circumcision. Circumcision is the act done in Hebrew tradition to show the devotion to God by cutting away of the unnecessary things, the unclean and impure things on your body. This is exactly the same idea that Scripture does for us today when we're oriented around Jesus. Scripture cuts away, pruning our heart, our attitudes and our minds as we see Jesus more and more clearly throughout Scripture.

This is why we must read it and understand it in all of its sweetness—just like honey. This is why we must apply it responsibly to our lives, because it will change us and make us more like Jesus, the purpose of Scripture. And this is why we must memorize it and hide it deep within our hearts and our minds—because it helps orient us completely around Jesus. In fact, if you'll notice on your sermon notes that were in your bulletin, one of the verses listed has an asterisk next to it—2 Timothy 3.14-17—well that's your memory verse for the week...work on it, hide it in your heart and in your mind... You may think it's big, you may think you can't do it cause it's too much—but hey, you've got to start somewhere and I truly believe that together we can do it. If 10 year olds can memorize the entire Old Testament, then we can certainly memorize 3 verses!

This is our goal; this is our purpose. To allow Scripture to change us by the power of the Holy Spirit as it centers us solely around Jesus and His ways, making us into the holy people God commands and calls for us to be. Because ultimately, that's what the Holy Spirit does, that's what Scripture does is point us back to Jesus.

*The law of the Lord is perfect,
reviving the soul.
The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy,
making wise the simple.
The precepts of the Lord are right,
giving joy to the heart.
The commands of the Lord are radiant,
giving light to the eyes.
The fear of the Lord is pure,
enduring forever.*

*The ordinances of the Lord are sure
and altogether righteous.
They are more precious than gold,
than much pure gold;
they are sweeter than honey,
than honey from the comb.
By them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.
[Psalm 19.7-11]*

[PRAY]