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“The Power of Scripture”

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Matthew 4:1 – 11

I'm afraid that you'll think because I'm preaching “The Power of Scripture” and I'm the pastor here, that I know what I'm doing, like I'm some kind of great spiritual warrior, when I'm not. All I can claim is God is a great Redeemer. And we have a great record of God's deeds, which we call Scripture, or God's Word, or the Bible. It is powerful, if we read it. There's a reason why it is the first book banned any time a new dictatorship comes to power. There's something about it, and through it God's glory comes through, even in tough times for people. Hope, and personal strength, and faith come to people. And today, just as in biblical accounts, God can take our failures and still tell His story, because it's about *His* power. But it's not just countries that battle over the Bible: Maybe the “dictatorship” that has invaded *your* life story involves cancer, or another illnesses, or perpetual discouragement, relationships in trouble, or out of control schedules.

The truth is, we're in a war, for the hearts and minds of people. It's a spiritual battle. And you and I have been identified, as either a player, like a soldier to help accomplish the mission, or as someone who will offer *no* opposition to the enemy, because we won't take a stand. I suppose you *could* also simply wind up a casualty. Sort of like the 3 kinds of people in the world: those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who stand around and wonder what just happened.

Every day, if you and I are following Jesus, we get dressed for battle...or not. Every day we either win a little back, or we lose ground. But hear me: most of the ground you will ever win or lose is within you yourself. The most violent, the most important, and the greatest battles ever won or lost are those fought on the soil of the human heart—your heart. The rest, the outward battles, are secondary. If we would win the battles that rage within our souls, you and I wouldn't be facing *half* the battles and frustrations we're living in right now.

God's Word has something to say about this whole inner battle. It's nothing new. It was there in the beginning, with the Adam and Eve and the serpent, and in Jesus' ministry. God knew if we were going to live for Him in such a way as to impact the world, it would be a battle. If you're tired of the battle, and especially if you're tired of being sidelined; listen:

Matthew 4:1 *“Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.* Okay, weird. You know what happened just before this. Jesus was baptized and God said “Behold, this is my Son whom I love, with Him I'm well-pleased!” And the Holy Spirit was there. Now, follow me Son...to the wilderness...to be tempted. (Wait a minute! I thought you loved me!) God did the same thing to Abraham, Moses, Peter, and perhaps with you. The whole idea of Jesus being led to the desert to be tempted, for the primary purpose to be tempted is weird. And in his teachings just 2 chapters later, Jesus tells his disciples to pray: “Lead us not into temptation...cause it happened to me and it's not pretty!”

2 After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. 3 The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” Now this is a pretty innocent temptation. It's hardly even a temptation. “You're hungry aren't you?” Yes. “You're the Son of God, aren't you?” Yes. “You've got miraculous power don't you?” Yes. Well, why don't you turn the stones into bread. And if Jesus would have had lunch with the devil we wouldn't have thought much about it. Kind of curious.

But Jesus SEES what is going on here. The issue isn't “Am I hungry?” If it were me, I might be

asking “Do I have the ability and opportunity to do this? Then I’m going for it.” But it’s much bigger than that. The issue isn’t my self-control. It’s not my hunger. This issue is *not* “Should I ever eat again?” The issue is, “Can I continue to trust my heavenly Father?”

With temptation, there’s always more at stake than what you think. And your ability to withstand has a lot to do with your confidence in God. The reason we know that is because Jesus does a flashback in his mind to something that happened to the nation of Israel in Scripture. God led them out of being a slave nation into the wilderness and eventually to the Promised Land. And on the way does this incredible miracle and feeds them for 40 years with this manna on the ground that came with the dew. They learn “God can be trusted for our daily needs,” and at the end of their journey Moses tells them to never forget. And Jesus quotes Moses’ Words back at Satan.

4 Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Even though it was a legitimate need, given by God, Jesus was tempted to meet it in an illegitimate way.

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. 6 "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: "'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" Satan leaves out that God protects those who are “in all God’s ways.” From Psalm 91. But Jesus knows you can’t leverage God for your own ends. We can’t use God’s power for selfish stuff like that. So Jesus says:

7 Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Jesus does it again.

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 9 "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." Satan was tempting Jesus to take a short cut. He was saying “I can accomplish the will of God for you and You can have these kingdoms right now.” Jesus was tempted to do the right thing the wrong way. Jesus may have gotten Himself “out there,” but would have left no cross. Being King without the cross would have blown God’s plan of salvation. It’s the same 3 temptations today: for your physical appetite and desires, for personal gain, and the easy path to power and glory.

10 Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" With temptation, there’s always more at stake than what you think. And your ability to withstand has a lot to do with your confidence in God. Jesus was through. No more. Some of us just need to keep saying that.

11 Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.” And God met His needs.

Jesus might have fought Satan with a thousand weapons; but he chose to defeat him with this one only. To all 3 challenges He said, “It is written; it is written; it is written.” Jesus uses Scripture to battle Satan. And for us to win over temptation *we* need to meet with Jesus through the Bible each day. A lot can happen, big things and little things, when we take time to allow Scripture to impact our lives.

I want you to hear what that looks like; so I want to invite David Kapusansky and Carol White up to share a bit about the role of Scripture in their lives.

2004 Barna research shows that for the great majority of Christians, being “born again,” calling yourself a Christian made no measurable difference in people’s behavior (Doing more good things like helping others, doing less bad things). So “believing” by itself produced no results in people’s lives. The only measurable difference was Bible reading and the impact that had on people putting their beliefs into actions. Why does Bible reading make a difference? Psalm 1 says it’s time to let God put ideas in your mind. And Romans 12:2 says you can actually have your mind renewed.

But I want to focus in on Hebrews 4:12 “*For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*” The Word of God in the hand of the Holy Spirit wounds very

terribly, and makes your heart bleed. Haven't you ever been "cut to the heart" with this Sword? You've probably been angry with it! But that sword pursued you, and pierced the secrets of your soul. And what a powerful and good thing that is. Because it's through the sword of the Spirit that my sins are slain and cut out. Your fears, and doubts, and despair, and unbelief, were also hacked to pieces by this same sword. The Word that gave me life was first a great killer in the war within my heart. There is no other sword but the Word of God. It contains the revelation of God—our only spiritual weapon, as modeled by Jesus.

I know God uses lots of ways to get people's attention: acts of service, acts of love, other spiritual books, loyal relationships, sometimes even a sermon...but the best of those are simply God's Word told in various ways.

Ugh! After all this, you're just going to tell me I "need to read the Bible more?" Yes. How can I understand it? Some simple rules:

1. Don't look for hidden meanings. God's Word is meant to unveil truth. Treat it as normal communication.
2. Don't read verse by verse. Read it in paragraphs. Most parts of the Bible are written in units of thought, not random verses. Go for the larger units to understand the bigger meaning.
3. Don't jump to conclusions. Read the Bible intelligently and think about what the passage is actually saying.
4. Read God's Word expectantly, not as a duty. God has given us the Bible, and God meets us in the pages. Expect God to touch your heart and mind.
5. Find a way to respond. React to what you've read. It's not simply philosophy. Christian faith is a lived out faith. Hear it and do it.

Our church is seeking to make an impact in the world. We want to give God more room to work. We can't DO that without equipping ourselves to be strong in the Lord and His power. Nothing can impact you more than God's Holy Spirit speaking to you through His Word. Now, let's draw our swords—Amen!

Study Guide for Matthew 6 – 10

Monday: Read Matthew 6. The Sermon on the Mount Not being a hypocrite – in giving, prayer, & fasting (1-18): Are you different on the outside than the inside? What can you do today "just for God?" Ask God "What can I do, just for you, Lord?" Where your heart is, and Worrying (19-34): On Treasures: Looking at this past week, is your "bank" on earth or in heaven? What do you want to do to "change accounts?" Who has been your boss lately? On Worry: Why pray when you can worry? ☺ What causes you the most worry?

Tuesday: Read Matthew 7. Sermon on the Mount Judging others, asking God, the narrow gate, "Lord, Lord," and the wise and foolish builder. (1-28). Jesus continues telling what it's supposed to look like in God's Kingdom. Considering the sermon as a whole, is your foundation on solid rock? Or on sand, with a nice view? What would you have to tear down in order to shore up the foundation? At this point in your life, is your most pressing need to learn more or practice what you have already learned? How about asking God for a Kingdom attribute?

Wednesday: Read Matthew 8. Healings (1-17). Are you more like the leper (I hope God heals me) or the centurion (I know God can meet my need) or Peter's mother-in-law (That was fast!)? What if goodness is contagious? The Cost of Following Jesus (18-22). When did you first learn the cost of following Jesus? How is that costing you now? Jesus Calms the Storm & Heals 2 Demon-possessed Men (23-34). What storms are you facing now? Does the Lord seem to be fixing or sleeping? What storms and demons seem too much for you to handle right now?

Thursday: Read Matthew 9. Jesus' Ministry in Full Swing. Healing a Paralytic, Calling Matthew (1-13). If Jesus really heals sin, why do so many Christians struggle with forgiveness? Questions about Fasting (14-17) Where is the 'new wine' in your life? A Dead Girl and a Sick Woman (18-26). The ruler and the woman were desperate. Can you be desperate for God? Healing Blind and Mute, the Workers are Few (27-38). In what ways are you still spiritually blind or mute? Where have you experienced Jesus transforming forgiveness? Thank God for that right now.

Friday: Read Matthew 10. Jesus Sends Out the Twelve in Ministry (1-42). This is amazing: Jesus is sharing his authority and ministry to heal and forgive and free people! All by being servants of others. How has God equipped you to heal and forgive and free people?

Tips for Bible Study

Remember: by looking at whole chapters, we are looking at larger chunks of Scripture. Look for overarching meanings. It doesn't have to be some deep experience every single time. Enjoy the rhythm of it. Don't allow it to become tedious, but rather, pray to be hungry for what God does reveal to you as you read. If a certain passage grabs you, that's the God of creation speaking to you through His Word! Mark it, or write it down. Have a notebook or journal handy.

Set a time to meet with your spouse. Have your family study it. Find a friend or small group of friends to touch base with, even if it has to be via email. What is God speaking to you? What are you learning? What's making sense? Find a friend as you go through this process to ask: How's your life? How's your walk with Christ? How's your ministry?