

One Standard: Scripture Alone

Five to One: How the Reformation

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We are starting a new sermon series this evening that will carry us for the next five or so weeks and it's on the Five Solas of the Reformation. Now if you know anything about Presbyterians, we love us some Latin, so "sola" is the Latin word for "only," and what the whole purpose of this series is to summarize the teaching of the Bible that was recovered during the Reformation, the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century that carried on through to the present day. And what the Reformers were concerned to do was to point out that in the Scriptures there are these, this summary teaching of what the Bible says about salvation, about life. It's a summary of their theology and there were five ways they did that, there were five headings, really, that they summarized their theology: the Bible alone; Christ alone; grace alone; faith alone; to the glory of God alone.

Now you may ask what does the 16th century have to do with me? We live in a time of great confusion about what is the gospel and what is kind of religious experience, and these five solas, these five "alones" make all the difference in understanding what the truth of the Bible and the gospel is. So as we go through them, I hope it's useful to see how the gospel differs from every other world religion, worldview, philosophy on offer today. With that in mind, let us turn our attention to the word of God and we'll be reading from 2 Timothy 3:16-17 which you'll find on page 996 if you're using a pew Bible. 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

Let's pray before we hear God's word.

Father, we hear many voices in our culture today clamoring to be heard, saying this is the way, the truth and the life, and so what we need tonight is to hear the Good Shepherd speaking to us in the word he inspired by the Spirit for your glory. There is one word of God and you have given it to us. May Jesus be lifted up and may we have ears to hear what the Spirit says to his people. We pray in Jesus' mighty name. Amen.

2 Timothy 3:16-17. This is God's word.

16 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

The grass withers and the flowers fall but the word of the living God will stand forever and ever. Amen.

I came across a story this week of a freelance writer named Chuck Ross who feeling a little disillusioned with the publishing system decided to test it out, so he took an award winning book by the name of "Steps," which I have not read, but won some major literary awards and he typed the first 21 pages, the first few chapters of this book "Steps," submitted it under a false name to four major publishers and was rejected with some mild criticisms. Two years later, he used another false name, retyped the entire novel "Steps," submitted it to four other major publishing houses, this time they'd obviously been talking to one another, they came back, rejected it with a bunch of harsh comments, said this will never work, this is an awful book. Here's the point: they didn't realize what they had, they didn't recognize that in their hands they held a manuscript of a book that had already won a lot of awards, and we can miss something if we don't know what it is.

So God wants to make sure we don't do that with the Bible, and so he tells us what it is tonight and those will be our headings as we look at Paul's teaching this evening, what the word of God is and what it does. That's the focus of Paul's teaching here in 2 Timothy 3. This is one of the last letters Paul wrote. He wrote it toward the end of his life and here's the thing, Paul is a guy who had seen all kinds of crazy stuff in the churches he pastored and planted, he saw people speaking in tongues, he saw miracles happen, he experienced the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit as one of Jesus' apostles. And here's the thing, as he writes these last few letters, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and Titus, they're called the pastoral epistles and the reason they're called that is because he wrote them to pastors of churches, Timothy was a pastor, here's the thing, here's what he's focused on as he gets ready to die. We would expect him to say something like, "Here's the main thing. Keep making sure miracles happen. Make sure everybody sees people speaking in tongues so that people know this gospel is for real." He does not do that. His bulk teaching sections in these three letters and here in 2 Timothy is no exception, is focused on those scintillating subjects on which most of us spend our devotional time: church government and false teaching. That's where Paul's focus is. He says, "I am concerned for the flocks of God, that they may be influenced by falsehood. Therefore, Timothy, Titus," when he writes to Titus, "I want you to be equipped and I want you to refute this false teaching because false teaching harms people." And that's where we find ourselves in 2 Timothy 3. Paul has warned about false teachers and as he capstones this chapter right prior to the last chapter of this epistle, he summarizes his views by telling us what the word of God is and what the word of God does.

Look back there with me at verse 16 at what the word of God is, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." What is the word of God according to this apostle, this inspired by the Holy Spirit apostle? He tells us a number of things about the word of God. He draws attention, first of all, to its scope, "All Scripture is breathed out by God." And this gives us a doctrine that theologians have called the plenary verbal inspiration of the Scriptures, and that is fancy language for every word of God in this book is chosen by the

Holy Spirit, given to the writers, and therefore without error in their original manuscripts. So we speak about infallibility in the Bible, we mean that it is incapable of having any errors. When we speak about the inerrancy of Scripture, we mean that it does not contain any errors either of scientific fact or religious teaching. Every word of God proves true, the Bible says, and that's what's at stake here for Paul. His view is the common Jewish view. It was the view of Jesus. You will search in vain to find anyone in history who had a higher view of the Old Testament than Jesus. Every time he quotes it, he quotes it as authoritative, as inspired, as without error, as incapable of error, as the only standard by which people should live, and Paul is no exception. He says, "Every word of God is God's word and all of God's words are in this book."

That's what he wants us to see and there is an immediate implication for our lives, isn't there? It's popular again today, this has happened before in church history, it's making the rounds again, this ancient error that says, "Well, some parts of the Bible are surely God's word, the other, there's others that were influenced by the culture around it, so really not God's words but more they were part of the culture of their time." Now inevitably these kinds of teachings make the rounds when there's an unpopular teaching in Scripture that comes in conflict with the majority report in the culture. So for example today we have people saying, "Well, the Bible doesn't really condemn same-sex marriage. That's just an ancient interpretation. The apostles were beholding to the culture around them and that's not really part of God's word." My friends, if every word is God's word, we lose the right to pick and choose. The moment you pick and choose which parts of the Bible you're going to believe is the moment that it ceases to be your final authority and you become the authority, not the Bible. So at the moment we say there's some parts that are God's word and some parts that are not is the moment that we function as the authority over God's word, as if that were possible and it's not.

So Paul says all of God's words are God's word, and then he tells us not just the scope but the nature of what the Scriptures are. And you say to yourself, "Maybe, well, he's just talking about the Old Testament. What about the New Testament?" Paul constantly says things like, "This is the word of the Lord for you. It's not my word." Other apostles say the same thing. So he has all of the Bible in view here and he tells us the nature of what it is. Our ESV translation captures it perfectly, "All Scripture is breathed out by God." Now here's the thing: Paul actually made up a Greek word to describe what the Bible is and we have it translated well here, and basically what he's saying is, "The Bible really is not so much inspired by God as it is expired by God. It's breathed out by him. It's the very word of God."

That's Paul's point, the nature of the Scriptures is that it's God speaking to us in a book, and don't we need to pause and wonder at that? We live in a culture that because of the Protestant Reformation is saturated with the Bible. We have Bible apps. We probably have multiple Bibles in our homes. There's Bibles in our hotel rooms, Bibles in our cars, Bibles on the radio, Bibles on an app, Bibles everywhere, and yet we still don't know this word well. We still have a massive crisis of authority not just in the culture around us but in the church and people saying, "I'm not sure this is God's word." And Paul tells us so plainly that this is him speaking to us.

And sometimes we're prone to say, "You know, if I could just hear God speak like Abraham did, like Moses did, like these great saints of the past did. Then I would believe." And do you know what Jesus says to that fascinatingly? Luke 16:31, do you know what he says? He's telling this parable about a rich man who goes to hell and a poor man who goes to heaven, and this rich man says, "No, no, no, just, just let me go back and tell my brothers that there's a place called hell and I'm there and the resurrection's going to happen and it's real." And do you know what Jesus says? "They have Moses and the prophets. Let them hear them. If they don't believe them, they won't believe if somebody rises from the dead." Here's the point: we say, "I'd just believe if I heard God speak," God is shouting at us, as it were, from this passage, "I have spoken. It's right here in the word that I've given to you. You can hear me speak anytime you want." And that's the amazing wonder of having a Bible, and it's something we take for granted but really for only the past 400 or so years have we been able to have a Bible in our homes. For most of church history to that point, nobody had Bibles, and we've got a priceless treasure all around us because it's breathed out by God Paul wants us to see.

And then he tells us what it's useful for. He gives us its scope, its nature, and now its use there under what God's word is. He says it's all inspired, every word, therefore it does some things or it is useful for these things, profitable for teaching. Paul is going to go on in 2 Timothy 4 and right from these verses say, "I charge you, Timothy, before God and his angels, there's one thing you need to do to make sure that God's people are healthy, to make sure that false teaching does not gain a foothold, to make sure that the mission of the church that Jesus has given to it is fulfilled. There's one thing you need to do, preach the word." Why? Because the Bible is God's word and therefore it's profitable for teaching. How could we get any better teacher than God himself saying, "Here's how to live life. Here's how to follow me. Here's what I want. Here's what I don't like. Here's what I love. Here's how to get your life in tune with what I know works best."

It's profitable for teaching and for preaching. That's why Christianity has always been a teaching religion. It's why it was despised in the early Roman Empire. Why? Because Paul and the other apostles and Jesus saw people as the image of God, unlike Roman society that said you weren't a person unless you had some sort of property and value and other things, and they said you're not a person, you're not worthy of being taught but Christians taught everybody. Why? Because the word of God is profitable for teaching, because they believed they had God's very word and they said, "Everybody needs to hear it." And that missionary impulse of the early church that furthered the apostles' mission, that drove them onwards, that fired their souls is the same thing that is available to us today in God's word.

We just prayed for missionaries. Why are they there? Why did they go out? Well, to fulfill the Great Commission, yes and amen, but why else? Because they believe deeply in their souls that the thing that the culture needs, any culture, any time, any place, more than anything else is to hear the word of God. That's why we make such a fuss about preaching around here and teaching, not just because Presbyterians like to read a lot and talk about preaching and teaching, we want to do that because we think it's biblical, we

think it's God's design to grow his church, we think it's God's design for the health of his people. We think it's the best thing for our souls because God tells us it is.

It's profitable for teaching and then Paul says it's profitable also for correction. If you've been a Christian any amount of time, you know what it's like when the preacher is preaching and afterwards you say, "That is exactly what I needed to hear. That has come home to my soul. I need to repent. I need to change. There's sin in my life that this sermon has discovered that there's no possible way that preacher could have known about." And what's happening there, friends? It's the Spirit working through his word, speaking to his people, showing us our sin, showing Jesus' grace and mercy and love to us, and it's correcting us, and if you're anything like me, it's really easy to go astray. My life looks like my drives on the golf course, it's a lot of times that way, it's not straight. I've got to have correction. I've got to have somebody get me in the right direction and God says, "I want to do that for you through my word." As you read it, as it's preached, as it's studied, it will correct us, it will come home to us, it will change us.

Then he also tells us it's profitable for training in righteousness. It builds us up. It teaches us how to follow Jesus. We're bewildered by the voices around us. We're bewildered by so many teachings saying, "This is the way, walk in it." And what we have is the promise of God saying if we want to know Jesus, if we want to follow him, we listen to him speaking to us in his word.

And then finally Paul says it trains us. It trains us. Don't you need to be trained to do things, to be taught things, to live life the way God intended? I need training. We all need training. If you're a parent in here, you're involved in daily training of your children and God say, "You are my children. I want to train you up in the way you should go," as it were, "and I do that through my word, not through new revelations of the Spirit, not through other supposed holy books. Through this book and this book only." That was the battle cry of the Reformation and it changed the world. Not church traditions. Not pronouncements of popes. No human authority because nowhere else is there the word of God but right here. That was what they took their stand on. That's why they were burned alive. That's why their ashes smoldered across the landscape of Europe and ignited a fire that's still going today, all because they believed this simple verse.

And then Paul finishes in verse 17 telling us what the word of God does. Look there at verse 17, "that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." He's writing to this minister Timothy. He says, "If you want to lack nothing," that's what "complete" means here, "you don't want to miss anything, you don't lack anything, you want everything you need to do the task God has called you to, it's in the word." And you say, "Maybe that's just for Timothy as a minister." No, no, no, Paul is saying, "You're going to be teaching and preaching, Timothy. I want to make sure that you understand what this word is so you can understand what it does not only in your life but in the lives of those to whom you minister." All of us are implied in this verse, that we would be complete, that we have everything we need to do what God has called us to do.

Boy, that's a subject of contention today because we're told that maybe the Scripture doesn't speak into certain cultural areas, maybe we need sociology to help us with that, maybe we need psychology. Now in their own rights those are perfectly fine disciplines that God uses to teach us many things, and they are good servants but they are poor masters like anything else. The Scripture alone has the final say. Not the culture. Not sociology. Not psychology. Not physics. Not biology. Nothing.

This is the final word and whenever that has been believed, God has changed the world. God has sent forth men and women who believed this, who said, "This is it. I'm taking my stand on the word of God. This is where I'm planting my flag. This is my life." They're doing exactly what Paul's telling Timothy here, "You'll be complete. You'll have everything you need." And he sends them out and they change the world because they stand on the only authority that stands.

And whenever I read this, I always think about Billy Graham, and some of you may know this but one of his early associates was a guy by the name of Charles Templeton, and Templeton was by some accounts the better preacher of the two. He was filling a church in Toronto I think of about 6,000 people weekly. He had been on one of Graham's crusades, he helped out with the Youth for Christ movement that Graham was involved in and Templeton began to have severe doubts about the Bible and he did probably the worst thing you could ever do with those, he went to a liberal theological seminary in the 1950s and at that time it was in vogue to deny that the Bible was the word of God, that Jesus was the Son of God, that the Spirit had inspired the Scriptures, that Jesus was coming again, or that he had even risen bodily from the dead. It was complete and total unbelief and Templeton was wrestling through this and he shared his doubts with Billy Graham and he made Graham begin to question his faith and it caused an awful struggle for Graham. And then he talks about one night when he took his Bible and he went out and he knelt down and he said, "God, I don't understand everything in this book but I believe this is your word. Would you help me?" Graham did the thing that we should all do when we have those doubts about the word, he took them to the Lord. Friends, that was the summer of 1949 right before the Los Angeles crusade that changed everything for Graham's ministry and it all happened he would say later on, because God brought him to that point of seeing the truth of what Paul is saying here, everything he needed was in this word.

And that's why Paul says at the end here, we are equipped for every good work. It's like he's piling on the terms and what he wants us to see is overarching all of this is that the Scriptures are sufficient. They don't lack anything. This was the cry of the Reformation as we mentioned a moment ago, and we still need to hear it today. Why? Because, again, we hear all kinds of other competing authority claims, "You can't trust Genesis anymore." Why? "Because science has disproved it." It has? I know so many believing faithful scientists who would beg to differ with that statement. Or we hear today that we need further revelations. Do you know how often that happens in church history? The Koran, why did the Koran come about? Because Mohammad said the New Testament was corrupted and therefore we needed a new revelation to correct the errors of the New Testament. Same thing with Joseph Smith. Same thing with the founders of the

Watchtower Society. Christian Science. Take your pick. The one thing they have in common is this word is not enough. The one thing they have in common is a denial of verse 17, that we have everything we need in God's word.

So what we have today is a massive crisis again of authority that says, "Here's the right way and the Bible isn't it. The Bible's not enough." And the Holy Spirit comes and says, "If you have ears to hear, you will find everything you need in the pages of a book." And I know and well realize, having spent some time in academia, how crazy that sounds. I understand that people say, "What? You're gonna take your instructions from a book that the last part of which was written about 2,000 years ago? That's how you're gonna live your life? That's crazy. We know better." And when we hear those things, we don't bury our head in the sand and pretend like objections aren't there. We face them with the same confidence that Paul wrote to Timothy.

Do you think the culture back then was much different? Read Acts 17 when Paul preached before the equivalent of the ancient version of the Harvard Divinity School faculty at the Areopagus in ancient Greece, the Who's Who of the ancient world, the ancient intellectual elite, and what happens to Paul there? "This guy is a babbler. He's talking about resurrections and God and everything else. And Paul, Paul, please, we know better." And nothing's changed since that time in Greece. It happens to us today and what we need is a renewed confidence that this is all his word, that God is speaking to us, that every time we open a Bible a miracle happens, as it were, that God's word leaps from the pages as the Spirit takes it and makes it alive to us.

And therefore what Paul would be anxious, I think, for us to see from these verses and what the New Testament makes clear and these two are inseparable and they are linked unbreakably and that is this: the finished work of Jesus gives us the finished word of God, because the Scriptures are complete or because Jesus' work is complete, the Scriptures are complete. That's why every denial without exception of the New Testament being complete always adds something to Jesus too. If you have an unfinished word, it's because you believe in the unfinished work of the Savior, and the moment you have unfinished work, you don't have a Savior anymore, you have a helper. We don't need a helper. We do need that but mainly we need a Savior. You don't need Jesus just to be your buddy. You don't need Jesus just to help you out with some spiritual feelings. You need him to save you from your sin and he does completely when you put your faith in him.

This, as we're going to see, is another hallmark of the Reformation. You can't add anything to Jesus. How could you? He's God in the flesh, and at the center of the word he wrote is him. His work. His person. Who he was. What he did. Why he did it. And for who he did it, namely you and me, and that's why we don't add anything to God's word because the moment we do, we lose the Savior who's at the center of every Bible book by his own teaching. I love that scene on the road to Emmaus. Luke 24, Jesus comes alongside some disciples and they don't recognize him and they begin talking and saying, "Oh, we thought he was going to be the Savior and he really wasn't the Savior, and he's crucified." And what does Jesus say? "O foolish of heart and slow to believe all that the

Scriptures have said. Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer then rise." Then Luke tells us, "Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he unfolded to them in the Scriptures the things concerning himself." That's a Bible study I want to go to. Jesus teaching us through every bit of the Old Testament saying, "It's all about me." And when he says that, we don't think he's crazy, we don't think he's an egomaniac. As Dr. Thomas pointed out so wonderfully this morning, we just, we know it's true when we hear it from his lips because of who he is, because of the kind of Savior that he is.

And it's all about him and therefore the question needs to be asked: how do we live out this Sola Scriptura, the Bible alone, the Scriptures alone as our only authority? Let me say three things as we finish up. First, if you want to live this out, study the Bible prayerfully. Study the Bible prayerfully. Open it up, ask God to help you, ask him to make it alive to you, ask him to speak to you through it. Pray every time you open this book as an individual or with your family or by yourself, whatever it is, you open it up and you pray over it and say, "O God, show yourself to me." And he will. He will always answer that prayer. It may not feel like it, there may be times when you don't feel it at all when you do your Bible study but he's still working, he's still speaking, and we have to listen. Study your Bible prayerfully.

Second thing I think how we live out Sola Scriptura, we sit under its preaching regularly. I was walking through the church yard with my middle daughter earlier and she saw the date on one of the tombstones there, 1734. 1734. That's almost 300 years ago and for almost 225 years right here the word of God has been preached. Don't tell me God won't bless it. He's preserved this church for 2 ¼ centuries. He's going to keep doing it as long as the word is faithfully preached here. Your greatest need this week, my greatest need this week is more of the word of God, more in my daily life, more on the Lord's day as we hear it preached, and every time we sit under it, he is moving us towards himself if we receive it by faith. There's no neutral encounter with God. You're either moving towards him as you hear it preached or you're being repelled away from him. And friends, I don't want anything but to see everybody here moved towards the love and the mercy and the grace of Jesus, and the way you do that is you sit under the preaching regularly.

And the last thing is that we need to let the Scriptures rule our life completely and that's a penetrating question to ask ourselves: is the Bible my only standard in my life? Do I have other authorities that I've been listening to that have led me astray from Jesus? I just read in John 10, I love these words, "My sheep know my voice. They will hear me. My sheep know my voice." When we hear the word and it begins to work in our hearts and we see Jesus, what is happening? We are hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd speaking to us. Have you heard him? Do you hear him? Does the Bible rule your life? Now, of course, all of us, it's imperfect, all of us disobey and we're not where we should be and I understand that totally but in principle we're saying to God, "I hate when I stray. I don't want to stray anymore. I want to be as close to Jesus as I can." He will honor that desire, friends. He will answer that prayer too, "Lord, be in charge of every part of my life. I've made a mess of it. I've messed it up times innumerable and I need you."

That reminds me of another incident I read about this week, an old story about the USS Jeannette, which was a 19th century vessel that was sailing to the Arctic captained by George De Long, and De Long had based his entire trip which turned out to be an ill-fated voyage that didn't return, if I'm not mistaken, and he set out and he had some maps done by this guy who had really never been there because nobody really had by that point, and so he had this great theory about the way the ice would move in the Arctic and he based all of these maps on this theory, and De Long read this guy's theory and said, "I think that's right and I think those maps are correct," and based the entire journey on those maps. The problem was they were all wrong and ice began to gather around the ship where he thought there would be none, and that's what sunk it, and the problem was not the planning, the problem was not the preparation, the problem was not the skill even of the person in charge of the ship, the problem was the standard they were using to guide them was wrong. And we will make shipwreck of our lives if we go by any other map than the map laid out right here in his word, that in his love and in his mercy he gave to us, and says, "I will never lead you astray and I will always bring you safely home."

Let's pray.

Thank you for a sure word, Lord, a life-changing word in your word, a word that is written, as it were, never to be moved. Jesus told us that heaven and earth would pass away but his words would never pass away and we hold onto that promise tonight. Make us men and women and children of the book, and most of all, Lord, as we open this book together, may we see the Word Incarnate who loves us enough to speak to us. Thank you for Jesus. We pray in his name. Amen.