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Loaded Questions:
Have You Never Read the Scriptures?
Matthew 21:33-46

On Friday night, Cyndi and I went to watch the wonderful production of *The Sound of Music* at Gig Harbor High. At intermission, I went to the restroom and, after washing my hands, stood there in front of the paper towel dispenser, waving my wet hands back in forth in front of the thing. But it wouldn't work. Don't those things frustrate you? A ten-year-old boy watched my antics for a while and then, in exasperation, reached over and turned the knob to make the towel come out. I was embarrassed and tried to cover. "Oh... thanks. I thought it was one of those automatic towel dispensers." The kid leaned over, pointed to the name on the front of the machine and said, "That's why it says, 'Dry Pull'!" Smart aleck! I was looking right at it but didn't understand what I was reading. Just like our story this morning.

[Read Matthew 21:33-46]

In the last week of his life, Jesus took off the gloves. The religious establishment was about to kill Him, but He was not going down without a fight. This parable was one of those battles. An absentee landowner hires tenants to work his land. When the harvest comes, he sends representatives to claim his share of the crop. But the tenants abuse his emissaries: beating one, stoning another even killing one. It is outrageous.

Finally, the landowner decides to send his own son. Surely, they will listen to him; will treat him with proper respect. Right? Nope. This is their chance to kill the heir and steal his inheritance once and for all. So the tenants murder the son.

"What should the landowner do," Jesus asks. What would **you** do? This is your estate, your crop, your servants being abused, and your **son** who has been murdered. What would you do? The religious leaders replied, "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants..." They answered so quickly, they didn't realize they were walking right into a trap. Did you see the loaded question?

"Have you **never** read the scriptures?" Jesus asks. 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.'" Then the punch-in-the-gut line: "I tell you that the kingdom of God will

be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed!"

"Have you never read the scriptures?" Jesus asked the religious leaders... the priests and teachers who were in charge of the scriptures. It was a **very** loaded question to them, wasn't it? And it is an important question for all of us. How about the unbeliever here this morning; the not-yet-Christian? "Have you never read the scriptures?" Your answer might be, "No, not really. I have a Bible on my shelf. But I haven't read it for years. No, I would say that I have never really have read the scriptures."

It would be an honest answer. That's why it is important to invite not-yet-believers to find out what the Bible actually says. That's what *Christianity Explored* is all about. For the past six weeks, 100 of us have been meeting in the Gathering Place for a journey through the gospel of Mark, among them folks who might not describe themselves as Christians. One is a Jehovah's Witness, another a Mormon, and others have no religion at all. In fact, one woman calls all this Christianity stuff "balderdash." And yet, there she is, along with other unbelievers, willing to study the evidence.

Good for them! And the best evidence we can put before them are the scriptures. Just reading the Bible can be a life-changing experience, because they aren't just dead words on a page. This is the living Word of God. The writer of a book in the New Testament called Hebrews describes the Bible as a "sharp, two-edged sword" that cuts away our defenses and opens us up to listen and believe and obey God. This book has power!

Something powerful happens when unbelievers read the Bible with a Christian friend. Elizabeth shared with us about her Bible study with two neighbors. I have an almost-Christian friend who joined me for a Bible study last Saturday. There is no better way to persuade someone to follow Christ than to put the evidence in front of them. And there is no better evidence than this. The Bible has been tried and tested for thousands of years.

Another benefit of inviting a non-Christian friend to read the Bible with you is this: it challenges their religious assumptions. "I believe all religions are the same. I believe God accepts everyone. I believe what matters is faith in something. I believe I will get to heaven because I'm a good person." How many of you have heard something like this?

What would be a good follow-up question to those statements? "Why do you believe those things? Is it just your opinion? Is it what you hope for; is that why you believe it?" With all due respect, who cares what someone's opinion is about such things? The question isn't, "What do you think about these important things?" The question is, "Is it true?" For thousands of years, millions of people

have put the Bible to the test and found it to be true. Of course, many don't trust the Bible. But it is a reasonable thing to ask, "At least try reading what this ancient book of wisdom has to say. It has stood the test of time. It has stood the test of critics and doubters. And you may discover that it stands the test of your own questions and doubts."

What would happen if you prayed for the courage to ask your non-Christian friend, "Would you like to read through the gospel of Mark together? Let's consider the evidence for Christianity before you decide whether or not Jesus deserves your trust."

I'll bet there is a second group that needs to hear this question this morning. You do know Jesus, you do love Him and want to follow Him... but you would have to admit that, really, you don't know much about what the Bible says and you haven't made the time to remedy that. "Have you never the scriptures?" No, not really. You know you **should**... but it's a big book. You don't know where to start. You've tried from time to time, but failed. And you feel guilty about it. Ring true for anyone here?

Three weeks ago a guy came in to talk. He's been a Christian all his life—raised in the church, the whole nine yards—but has never really taken the Bible seriously. But he feels like God is stirring him to do so; he wants to be a better spiritual leader in his family. And he wanted to know how to get started. So I gave him some tips and I'm anxious to see if he can overcome his experience of failure and guilt.

Because you see, I understand exactly how he feels. Brace yourself: your pastor is about to disappoint you. It took me 54 years before I started reading the Bible every day. I started, stopped, started, failed, started, collapsed... all the time heaping guilt on top of guilt. I'm a pastor for crying out loud! I get **paid** to do this! But more importantly, I knew it was something my soul needed. So two summers ago, I tried again. I told God that every morning I would get on my knees to pray, and then I would read from the One Year Bible. Sometimes it is inspiring. Sometimes it is dull. Sometimes I engage it seriously. Sometimes I just check it off my list. But I am now into my second year and have created a new spiritual habit for my life.

I'm sure you are shocked to discover your pastor's on-again/off-again devotional life. But maybe it will be an encouragement to those of you who find it hard to discipline yourselves. You can do this! For the rest of Lent until Easter, instead of giving up chocolate, start eating God's Word. Pick a time. I think morning is the best. Promise yourself to do it for 30 days without exception. Get on your knees for a moment, read a few verses from Mark, pick out one verse or idea that strikes you, chew on it all day long, and see if it doesn't begin to change the way you approach life.

There is one more group that needs to hear this question from Jesus. And this is really the point that Jesus was making in this story. He was not talking to unbelievers or immature believers. Jesus was talking to the religious hotshots of the time... the spiritual leaders. "Have you never read the scriptures?" Jesus asked them. It was a loaded question. What was the answer? "Of course we have read the scriptures! We have most of them memorized! We teach them. We are the biblical experts. Your question insults us."

"Okay, then," Jesus goes on to say, "How is it that you don't see what is right in front of you? You've read the prophecies about the Messiah, right? You remember the warnings about how God's Chosen One would be rejected by the people He had come to save? How is it that you cannot see that is exactly what is happening right here... right now? I am that Messiah. You are those stubborn people. I am the long-awaited capstone... that final piece to what God is building on earth. But you have rejected me, just like the prophets warned. And this rock that you are about to throw away... He is going to crush you, you spiritual hypocrites!"

Pastor Jeremy and I drove down to Portland this week for a workshop to prepare us to be examined for our admission into the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. Our wives took the train down to meet us. So Monday night, JV and I drove into Portland to pick them up at the station. On the way, we got a call from them: "Our train just hit a car!" They were they kidding, right? Nope. One mile from the station, the train hit an abandoned car on the tracks. No one was hurt, but they had to sit there for two hours until, finally, they pulled the car off the train and it crept the last mile into the station.

How did that happen? The car was sitting there in front of the engineer. But he didn't see it until it was too late. That is exactly the point that Jesus is making. "Have you never read the scriptures? You say you have, but everything that is clear, everything that is right in front of you about me, the Messiah, everything that tells you how you ought to live... somehow, you aren't seeing it. And you are in for a disastrous crash."

This is the point Jesus wants to make here. Yes, He wants unbelievers to read the scriptures in a search for truth. Yes, He wants the immature believers to read the scriptures so that they might grow. But His loaded question is really reserved for the churched-up, Bible-savvy person who claims to know Christ... but whose life outside of Sunday morning bears no fruit, no evidence of that relationship. What do I mean?

You are sexually active with your boyfriend, girlfriend or fiancé. "Have you never read the scriptures that tell you that sex belongs in the covenant of marriage; that all other sexual activity is wrong and destructive?" "Yeah, I've read it. But I don't care. That's old-fashioned, and I like I like it! So I'm going to do it."

You are divorcing your spouse. They haven't abused you, haven't cheated on you. You just don't "feel it" anymore. "Have you never read the scriptures that declare God hates divorce; that what God has brought together, no one should divide?" "Yeah, I've read it, but I am not happy; she doesn't fulfill me. I want out."

You hoard and spend every dime you make. You don't give anything. Not to worthy causes and certainly not to your church... the church that you turn to whenever you need something. "Have you never read the scriptures that tell you that the first ten percent of everything you make belongs to God, not you?" "Yeah, I've read it. But I don't care. It's my money; I'm going to spend it on me."

You have never spoken a word about Jesus to anyone. You've heard sermons, taken the classes... but when the opportunity comes, you refuse to open your mouth for a word of witness. "Have you never read the scriptures where Jesus called his followers to make disciples for him?" "Yes, I've read it. But I'm not comfortable, I'm not knowledgeable, I'm not brave. I'm just not going to do it, and I don't care if it is the Year of Good News."

This is **not** about you being perfect... not about never failing, never struggling with lust, never struggling in your marriage, never struggling with greed or inadequacy. But what Jesus warns against is the attitude that says, "I've read the Bible, I go to church, I've heard the sermons, I know what God expects, I know he promises to help me do it... but I just don't want to. I will make my own decisions. No one will tell me how to live... not some pastor, not some church, not some old book, not even God."

If anything is to be learned from this hard story and this loaded question, it is this: those who consider themselves the most religious—the most churchy—can be the most at risk of knowing the Word and not doing it. If that describes you, you aren't the one riding in the train. You are sitting on the tracks, and Jesus warns you: the Truth of his Word will run right over the top of you. And you will not win that battle. Have you never read the scriptures?

Sermon Questions

- **REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- **PRAY TOGETHER:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- **DIG DEEPER**
 1. Discuss this parable. It is obviously intentionally disturbing. Why were the religious leaders upset about it?
 2. What is Jesus' loaded question here? How does it speak to those who are not reading the scripture? How does it speak to those who **do** read scripture... but are not obeying it? Which describes you?