

What Matters to the Master: 1. God's Word, Part 1
From the series, "The King and I -Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe"
Presented to Trinity Church of Teaneck NJ
On Sunday, August 23, 2020

Introduction

I ran into an interesting article the other day. It was from the magazine, "Psychology Today". Here's the title: "Ten Signs You Know What Matters". It's an article that talks about values. Here's how it starts out: "Values are what bring distinction to your life. You don't find them, you choose them. And when you do, you're on the path to fulfillment."

Fulfillment: That sounds good. We'd all like to be fulfilled in life. - Or at least that's what we're told by magazines like Psychology Today.

Values. Our values are what matter to us. Our values involve the things that are important to us. The article starts off with something that I think is a true statement: ***"You don't find them – you choose them."***

We choose our values. How do we do that? To do that, we need something. We need information - Information about our world. When we have information about our world, we choose what's important.

Where do we get information? If you read on in this article, you find that information can be hard. Here's why: "...it is harder than ever for people, and especially young people, to know what they value. Modern technology has created a fire hose of information in the expansion of communication media. The gush of words and images we have unleashed on ourselves risks psychologically overwhelming us."



Picture that: A firehose set to full. The water comes gushing out. You wouldn't want to be standing in front of that. That's what information is like today. It's a "gush of words and images" that "risks psychologically overwhelming us."

For a long time, we had books. Then came newspapers and magazines. Then we added billboards as we drove down the road. Today we add phones and computers. In the midst of this



“firehose” of information, how do you select the information you need to choose your values?
How do you choose what matters?

In chapters 5-7 of Matthew’s Gospel, we hit what we’ve been calling “The Christian Manifesto”. An important part of a manifesto is to tell people what’s important. In other words, “What matters?” Once you know what matters, then you can talk about goals and how you will achieve those goals. So today, we’ll begin a short series of messages that we’ll call: “What Matters to the Master” If you want to be a disciple of the Master, you must know what’s important to him. Let’s put it this way:

*For the Master to be your Master,
what matters to the Master must matter to you.*

Today, we’ll discuss the first of these items in our series - The things that matter to the Master

What matters to the Master is God’s Word. Let’s read:

17 “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. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. 19 Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.
(Matthew 5:17-20)

To understand what we just read, we need to ask a question: Why does God’s Word matter to the Master? Let’s find out.

I. God’s Word matters to the Master because it represents God’s very being.

We’re going to find that God’s Word matters because it represents God’s very being.

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. (Matthew 5:17)

What is Jesus referring to? What are the “Law and the Prophets”? In other places Jesus refers to these as “Moses and the Prophets”.

The Law and the Prophets are what we today call the Old Testament. The first Five books are the writings of Moses, also known as “The Law”. At the end, we see the writings of the great prophets like Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Daniel. Squeezed in-between these books are the history of the early Jewish people. That includes the Judges, people like Samuel, Samson, and Gideon. Later we see the Hebrew Kings like David and Solomon. Finally, we have the poetry books like Psalms and Proverbs.

These documents stood at the heart of the Jewish world when Jesus appeared. Every faithful Jew knew about them. Many of them memorized large segments.

Why would anyone think Jesus wanted to abolish them? There are two reasons Jesus brought this up. First, some people were always looking for excuses to discredit Jesus. To them, Jesus was some pompous radical who didn’t respect the ancient writings. Perhaps the revered writings were threatened by such a man?

Others though, had a Scriptural reason. The prophet Jeremiah spoke of this:

31 “The days are coming,” declares the Lord,
“when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel
and with the people of Judah.
32 It will not be like the covenant
I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt...”
(Jeremiah 31:31-32)

Some people read this and said that when the Messiah came, he would throw out the old Law and replace it with something else. How did Jesus look at all of this?

“I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” (Matthew 5:17)

How did Jesus intend to fulfill the Law and the Prophets? Jesus fulfilled many things. Let’s talk about two of them.

A. Messianic Prophecy

First, he fulfilled Messianic prophecy. We’ve talked about that a lot. The writers of the Old Testament made numerous predictions about the Messiah centuries before Jesus came. Here’s just one:

14 I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint.
My heart has turned to wax;
it has melted within me.
15 My mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;
you lay me in the dust of death. (Psalm 22:14-15)

How does someone have their bones out of joint? How does their heart turn to wax and melt? ***These are things that would happen if someone was crucified.*** When hands are nailed to a cross it puts weight on the arms at a weird angle. Eventually the joints would give out. If a person were hanging, bleeding in the hot sun, they would become dehydrated. Eventually, their blood would become so thick, the heart would give out.

This looks like someone being crucified. As if this was amazing enough, the psalm writer goes on:

16 Dogs surround me,
a pack of villains encircles me;
they pierce my hands and my feet.

Again, this passage looks like it's describing a person being crucified. Psalm 22 was written by King David, who lived a thousand years before Jesus. At that time, crucifixion hadn't been invented. You could be executed by stoning. You could die by being beheaded or run through with a sword. You could be impaled. There were all kinds of grisly ways to execute people over the years, but no one died by having their hands and feet pierced when David wrote this. Crucifixion was invented by the Romans centuries later.

This is one of many predictions about the Messiah, written centuries before Jesus came. Jesus fulfilled these prophecies. So, Jesus had no reason to abolish the Law and the Prophets because they were evidence that he was the promised Messiah.

But there's an even more profound reason for Jesus to keep the Scriptures. Let's open our Bibles at the beginning: Genesis.

1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. (Genesis 1:1-2)

So, God created everything – the heavens and the earth. How did he start?

3 And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. 4 God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night". (Genesis 1:3-5, Emphasis mine)

God speaks, and things happen. He says, "Let there be light" and there's light. When those things happen, God supplies words for them. God doesn't just create things and leave them floating in the Universe. God assigns names to the things he creates. He assigns words. In this case, "day" and "night".

This tells us something about God. The presence of speech indicates thoughts. This is telling us that God has thoughts. Some of the thoughts are spoken, and they become things - planets, stars, the universe. Other thoughts are spoken, and they're written down by humans. Those humans are called "Prophets".

So, when we open the Scriptures, we're seeing the thoughts of God. We see a representation of God. These are not just words. These are not just stories. These words and stories represent God. God wants to share his thoughts with us. God is opening his heart and his mind to us. We meet him in the pages of Scripture.

The Apostle John goes even further:

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. (John 1:1-3)

Later in that line of thought:

14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

Jesus is the Word. The words of Scripture represent him. He fulfills the Scripture because the Scriptures represent him. So, God's Word matters to the Master because it represents God's very being. Jesus was not sent to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill them.

Having learned that, let's look at more reasons. Why else does God's word matter to the Master?

II. God's Word matters to the Master because it reveals God's eternal plan.

Because the Scripture represents God, it's eternal - And it reveals God's eternal plan.

18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. (Matthew 5:18)

Every major language in our world has an alphabet. We have symbols for every sound. Our language, English has letters that in some cases are very simple.

The easiest letter to write is the lower-case “l (l)”. It’s just one line. Hebrew has some similar letters – they only have one stroke. Greek has them, too.

We also have letters that change dramatically if we just add a small stroke. Lower-case “l” becomes a “T” with just one stroke. Again, Hebrew and Greek have some similar letters.

Jesus doesn’t just say that every word of Scripture is important. He says that every letter of Scripture is important. He uses colorful language to emphasize this even more - Not the smallest letter, not the smallest stroke will pass away until something happens.

What is that “something”? “...until everything is accomplished”.

What is that? Everything! Everything described and predicted in the Old Testament must come to pass.

Currently, while we live on our broken world, we have a limitation: Paul talked about it in Corinthians:

12 For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. (I Corinthians 13:12)

Right now, we don’t see everything. Jesus and the Father are in heaven. Someday, Jesus will return to bring his Kingdom to the earth. All of Scripture will be fulfilled. Then, we’ll have something better than the written words of Scripture. We’ll have the God whom the Scriptures describe. We’ll have Jesus and see him face to face. Until then, we have his written Word.

Let’s move on to our final point. There’s another reason God’s Word is important to the Master.

III. God’s Word matters to the Master because it reveals true and false disciples.

God’s Word reveals true and false disciples. How does it do that?

Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:19)

There's a simple formula here: Set aside parts of the Word of God. Pretend that they don't matter. You will be called least in God's kingdom. On the other hand, you can teach the entire Word of God. You will be called great in God's kingdom. That seems simple enough, but let's dig a little deeper. What is Jesus talking about?

First, we need to understand what Jesus is **not** talking about here. He's not saying that it's wrong to prioritize Scripture. Later in Matthew, someone asked Jesus the following question:

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” (Matthew 22:36)

We're told that Jesus gave an immediate answer:

37 Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (Matthew 22:37-40)

Jesus himself taught that it's appropriate to see some Scripture as core teaching. We start with these core teachings and work out.

It's also fine to say that sometimes one piece of Scripture relates to a given situation better than others. If I see someone stealing, I might tell them, “Thou Shalt not Steal”.

So, what **is** Jesus saying? To illustrate, let me share a story from an old movie. In 1960, Walt Disney released the movie, “Pollyanna”. Pollyanna is the story of a young girl, a teenager who lived in the early 1900s. Her parents were missionaries, but sadly, they died. She was left in the care of a strict aunt who lived in the town of Harrington, Vermont. In spite of all the things that have gone wrong in her life, Pollyanna is a very positive young lady. In fact, if you know someone who is overly optimistic no matter what goes wrong, you might give them the nickname “Pollyanna”.

Among various events in the story, at one point Pollyanna gets into an interesting discussion with the local minister one day. His name is Reverend Ford. She asks him if he likes being a minister. He's never been asked that question before. He's perplexed, so he replies, “why would you ask that?” Pollyanna answers back, “because you don't look very happy.”

After some discussion, Pollyanna shares that at one time, her father was unhappy. Recall he was a missionary. But he figured out a way to change. Reverend Ford is extremely interested in this.

What was the solution? Pollyanna says her father began to search the Bible for ‘happy’ scriptures. Scriptures that say things like, “Shout for joy to the Lord”. He found 800 such Scriptures. After finding them, Pollyanna’s father decided that he would only preach from those Scriptures. He stopped preaching on Scriptures that made people feel bad. He would only teach based on Scripture that made people feel happy. From that point forward, Pollyanna’s father was happy, and the people who listened to him were happy.

From this story, we can see what Jesus was talking about. It’s not that some Scripture isn’t more central than others. It’s not that some Scripture isn’t more applicable at different times. ***It’s that some Scripture makes people unhappy.*** People are bothered by those Scriptures. Why is that?

Let’s see what the apostle Paul had to say about Scripture:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness... (II Timothy 3:16)

“All Scripture is God-breathed” (some translations say ‘inspired’) There is nothing more personal than your breath. As we said, Scripture represents God.

Here’s the problem: Some people don’t want God in their lives. They don’t want to be taught. They don’t want to be rebuked or corrected. They don’t think they need any instruction in righteousness.

The apostle John said it well:

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. (John 3:19)

My friends, would you like to be rich? Start an organization. Call it a church. Tell people you’re speaking for God and reading from the Bible. Then, only read things that make people happy. Talk about success, healing, joy, and acquiring money. Don’t read the parts of the Bible that challenge, or rebuke, or confront. People pay handsomely to be part of a church like that. They’ll pay because their lives are full of darkness, and they don’t want any light changing that.

That’s tragic. There was a group of people in Jesus’ day who did exactly that. Let’s read about them:

For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:20)

Next week, we'll have a "part 2" to this message. Among the things we'll discuss is the Pharisees. We'll also run into them a lot as we study the book of Matthew. For now, we'll just summarize. The Pharisees claimed to represent God. They were "religious leaders" in Israel. But they were largely corrupt. Among their sins, they did exactly what Jesus warned about. They concentrated on only the Scriptures that allowed them to feel superior to others. On top of that, they developed a whole series of rules and laws that, as a practical matter, were regarded as more important than writings called "The Law and the Prophets". Jesus said that anyone who wanted to be in the kingdom of heaven would need to do much better.

God's word demonstrated that Pharisees were an example of false leaders; false disciples. We hope that, with God's help, we can be good disciples. One way to do that is to do book studies on Sundays. We start at the beginning of a Bible book and work all the way through. We leave nothing out.

Let's pull this all together.

Conclusion

Today we've begun our mini-series on "what matters to the master". We've learned that one thing that matters greatly to the Master is God's Word.

God's Word represents his very being. It's not just words and stories. It's words and stories that represent the thoughts of God. We meet God in the pages of the Bible.

God's Word is eternal. We need every word, even every letter to guide us until the day that our Lord Jesus returns to bring his kingdom to this earth.

True disciples value every part of it. False disciples pick and choose the parts that make them happy. We'll hear more on that next time. That's why we dedicate ourselves to study and respect the whole of God's Word.

We close by being reminded:

*For the Master to be your Master,
what matters to the Master must matter to you.*

Does God's Word matter to you? In a world where information comes at us like water out of a fire hose, we desperately need God's Word. Let's pray and ask for his help to respect it. Let's dedicate ourselves to learn it and learn it well. *Every word of it.*