

March 26, 2017

Don't Give Up!

Don't Give the Bible!

Acts 8:26-31

Opening words: Did you know 24% of all Americans observe the season of Lent? Lent comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *lencten*, which means "spring." Excluding Sundays, because every Sunday is a little Easter, Lent is a forty-day period. Why forty days? Because, Jesus fasted forty days before being tempted by Satan. Lent began on Ash Wednesday and will end on Holy Saturday. Every year we are asked the same question, "What are you going to give up for Lent?" Maybe this is a better question: What are you not going to give up for Lent? Never forget, Lent is not a season of self-deprivation, it is a season of spiritual renewal.

Historically, Americans have always had an appreciation of the Bible. It is not just limited to one place or generation. Consider these quotes with me:

George Washington (1732-1799) once said, "*It is impossible to rightly govern a nation without God and the Bible.*"

Patrick Henry (1736-1799) once said, "*The Bible is worth all the other books that have ever been printed.*"

U.S. Grant (1822-1885) once said, "*Hold fast to the Bible as the sheet-anchor of your liberties. Write its precepts in your hearts, and practice them in your lives.*"

Robert E. Lee (1807-1870) once said, "*In all my perplexities and distresses, the Bible has never failed to give me light and strength.*"

Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919) once said, "*A thorough knowledge of the Bible is worth more than a college education.*"

As a nation, we still value the Bible. Did you know 88% of all Americans own a Bible? Did you know the average American home possesses 4.4 Bibles? The problem is not possession. The problem is practice. Only 16% of Americans read their Bible daily.

This is sermon number five in my six-part sermon series, *Don't Give Up!* We are looking at five of the twelve spiritual disciplines. To date, we have looked at prayer, fasting and worship. Next week we will look at meditation. Today we are going to look at reading the Bible. Can I ask you a question? How often do you read your Bible? Your answer will reveal something about spiritual health. Our scripture reading for today is Acts 8:26-31. Let me call today's message *Don't Give Up the Bible!*

Acts 8:26-31 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." ²⁷ So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means "queen of the Ethiopians"). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸ and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. ²⁹ The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."

³⁰ Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked.

³¹ "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

I love this story - it is one of my favorites. Famed scientist Albert Einstein had one of the brightest minds in the history of the world. However, history tells us he struggled with some of life's most basic tasks. For example, one day he was taking the train home from work. He took the same train home every day. On one day, he lost his ticket. As the porter approached to collect it, Einstein rummaged around in his coat, through his pockets, in his shirt, and everywhere else on his person. The porter saw him struggling and said, "That's okay, Dr. Einstein. I know you ride this train every day. I can collect your ticket tomorrow." "That's fine for you, young man," Einstein replied, "However, the problem is not my lost ticket. The problem is, without my ticket, I don't know where to get off the train!"

Many tell us that is the story of the modern mainline protestant church. We look like we know where we are going, but we really don't have a clue. Many believe the mainline protestant church is filled with lost people. They are not lost because they are not nice people. They are not lost because they are not hard-working people. They are not lost because they are not devoted to their local church. They are lost for one reason. They are lost because they are spiritually immature. They are more interested in their opinions and beliefs than they are in Biblical truth. How interested are you in Biblical truth? Actor Denzel Washington once said, *"I read my Bible every day."* Can I ask you these questions? Do you read your Bible every day? If not, how often do you read the Bible? Do you consider yourself spiritually mature? If those questions make you think, say, **"Amen!"** Let me state the obvious. Reading the Bible is vital to your spiritual health! Let us look at this morning's scripture lesson.

We are at the very end of the eighth chapter of Acts. We are told an angel of the Lord instructs Philip to go south to the road that runs between Jerusalem and Gaza. That angel is mentioned four times in the Book of Acts. Let me list them for you. Stephen mentioned the angel at his trial in chapter seven. The angel is mentioned twice in chapter twelve. The angel liberates Peter and strikes down Herod. This time, the angel instructs Philip to go to the desert road that runs between Gaza and Jerusalem. The distance between those two locations is fifty miles. Somewhere on that road he finds a unique traveler, an Ethiopian eunuch.

To say the least, he is an interesting character. We know two things about him. First, we know his nationality. How good is your geography? Could you find Ethiopia on a map? In those days, Ethiopia was the upper Nile region. Second, we know his occupation. He was the treasurer of the queen of Ethiopia, Candace. He is a eunuch because he works with the queen and fornication will not be tolerated. Gentlemen, can I ask you a question: Would you trade places with him? He has a wonderful job, but his

personal life was lacking. In other words, his life is complex. No wonder he is on the side of the road studying the ancient text. His life is filled with questions and he wants some answers. This is where the text begins to speak to us. When Philip finds the Ethiopian, he is reading the scriptures, but he does not understand the scriptures. It is one thing to read the words. It is another thing to understand the words. When was the last time you played the part of the Ethiopian? When was the last time you read the Bible, but you didn't completely understand the words? I will be the first one to admit it: the Bible is complex. Only a fool would think reading and understanding the Bible is simple. Just think about it for a moment. There are sixty-six books in the Bible; thirty-nine in the Old Testament and twenty-seven in the New Testament. Have you ever read the Bible cover to cover? Have you ever stopped to consider how many kinds of literature are found in the Bible? Have you ever stopped to consider the age of each word found in the Bible? Have you ever studied the original languages of the Bible, Hebrew and Greek, to expose some hidden meaning? Have you ever considered how much time there is between the oldest words in the Bible and the newest words in the Bible? Have you ever stopped to consider how much time has passed since the Bible was completed? Each one of us can agree with the next line in this message: The Bible is complex; no wonder the Ethiopian Eunuch needed some help. If you have ever needed some help understanding the Bible, say, "**Amen!**" Can I give you some pastoral advice? The complexity of the Bible is not an excuse for not reading it. Reading the Bible is vital to your spiritual maturity. Let me give you two reasons why.

First, the Bible is practical. Ronald Reagan once said, "*Within the covers of the Bible are all the answers for all the problems man faces.*" The Bible addresses a wide variety of practical topics. How would your life improve if you applied these Biblical models to your daily life? How many of the problems you are facing today would not exist if you would have followed the Biblical model from the very beginning? Are all your relationships healthy? Are your finances strong? Are you still worried about your salvation? The Bible covers these things because the Bible is practical. The Bible can help you with the biggest problem you are facing today! The Bible is practical!

Second, the Bible is eternal. The piece of scripture the Ethiopian is trying to understand is found in Isaiah 53, the suffering servant passage. Approximately 700 years before the birth of Christ, Isaiah was talking about Jesus. Martin Luther once said, "*The Bible is the cradle wherein Christ is laid.*" The great reformer understood the real meaning of the Bible. The Bible is all about Jesus, our only hope of salvation. The Bible is eternal. How often do you read the Bible? As a society, we don't read our Bibles enough.

Before Jimmy Fallon was host of the *Tonight Show*, it was Jay Leno. I liked Jay Leno. I really liked his Jay Walking segments. He would walk through the streets of Hollywood and ask people simple questions. It is amazing what people don't know. One night he asked three college-age men questions about the Bible. He asked the first young man to name one of the Ten Commandments. He answered, "Freedom of Speech". Then, Jay asked the second young man to complete this sentence: Let the one who is without

sin... He answered, "have the most fun". Smugly, the third young man laughed at his friends. Jay asked that young man, who in the Bible was swallowed by a great fish or whale? The young man smiled with confidence and answered, "I know this one. It was Pinocchio!" We laugh at those ridiculous answers, but it really isn't funny. Our national Biblical illiteracy rate is at an all-time high. It seems to be getting worse all the time.

When I was in seminary, a friend found a tiny book hidden in the stacks. He told me it was a Bible trivia book. He wanted to ask me a few questions. He did, and I answered about half of them. I was proud of myself until he showed me the title. With a copyright in the 1800's, it was a Bible trivia book for children ten years old and younger. We just don't know the Bible like our ancestors. It is time to start reading the Bible again. Let me ask you this question: When was the last time you just read the Bible for the edification of your soul?

In 1989, I was appointed to the Hathaway United Methodist Church in Garfield Heights. I have nothing negative to say about that congregation. They were good to me and we grew together. When I first arrived, I did my best to get to know everyone. I did my best to discover what kind of activities they would support. In the first few months, I took a survey to learn more about them. On the survey were a wide range of questions. One of the questions was: do you think this church should hold a regular Bible study? Ninety-eight per cent of the people said, "Yes!" So, I planned a weekly Bible study and decided to use the biggest room in the church. After all, 98% of the people said the church should hold a weekly Bible study. On the night I held the first Bible study I learned two things. First, I didn't need the biggest room in the church. Second, I found out that evening I asked the wrong question. I should have asked, would you attend a weekly Bible study? The survey told me 98% of the people said there should be a weekly Bible study, but less than 2% of the congregation actually came.

It has been a long time since my unsuccessful weekly Bible study. Do you know what happened to the Hathaway United Methodist Church? It pains me to say it. The church is now closed. They say it merged with other congregations, but a merger is really a closing. Hathaway did not close because the people were bad. Hathaway did not close because the people were lazy. Hathaway did not close because the people were not devoted to their church. Hathaway closed for spiritual reasons. Hathaway closed because the church was spiritually immature. Why would God lead people to a church that was spiritually compromised? Are you spiritually compromised? Are we spiritually compromised? Spiritually mature people read the Bible. How often do you read the Bible? How important is the Bible to you?