



READ WELL

What is *the* authority in your life?

According to our post-modern society, *you* are. It's the mantra we all live by, whether we realise it or not (until we meet something we're not an authority on – and then we turn to YouTube).

But as Christians, we know the answer we're supposed to give is God, and as *sola scriptura* protestants, we would say the way we access that authority is? The Bible.

But the Bible is a complex set of books: how exactly are we supposed to interpret it? And live it?

That's what the next part of Jesus' sermon is all about:

Matthew 5:17-20

At the time of Jesus, the question of how we interpret the Bible was a hot topic.

The Sadducees believed in the *Torah* or Law alone (probably because their priestly authority stemmed from it). The Pharisees believed in all of what they called the *Tanakh*, the Hebrew Scriptures (the OT), but even among the Pharisees there were differences of opinion on some of the finer details. And the Essenes decided they were all wrong and took themselves off into the desert to set up a community and do their own thing.

Into this world steps Jesus. And in these 4 verses Jesus provides His followers with 4 crucial points as to how to approach, interpret and apply scripture.

It has to be:

1) Christ-centred. "Do not think that I have come to overturn the *Torah* (Law) or the *Nvi'im* (Prophets); I have not come to overturn them, but to fulfil them."

Why does He kick off with this? Because some of what Jesus is going to say might *sound* as though He's contradicting scripture. But He isn't. Instead, He's challenging the way scripture is being interpreted – which is why He says, "I have come to fulfil them." Or in Greek, *plero'o*, 'I have come to fill them full' (the true meaning of 'fulfil' in Matthew and the rest of the NT). Yes, Jesus fulfils messianic prophecy and expectation. But more than that, He embodies the way in which we are to read and apply the Bible to our lives, as His disciples.

So, when we read scripture, we need to consider context. But we also need to ask ourselves these questions:

"What does this say about Jesus? And what does Jesus say about *this*?"

2) Eternally binding. "Amen, I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least pen-stroke, will disappear from the *Torah*, until all is completed."

To get what Jesus is saying here, it's helpful to know something about the Hebrew alphabet. The smallest letter is the *yod*, but with the stroke of a pen it could easily become a *vav*, and with a longer stroke a closing *nun*. Change the letter, you change the word, you change the meaning. Now at this point we could have an interesting discussion about textual variants and the fact that the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Masoretic text, and the Septuagint (Greek OT) all read differently to each other, in certain places (though not in any hugely doctrinal way). But we won't go there now – because that's not the point.

The point is: every bit of this is relevant.

Or as Paul says in 2 Timothy: "All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training. In righteousness."

3) Personally followed. "Therefore, whoever sets aside one of the least of these commands, and teaches others to do so, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven ..."

According to Jesus, the mark of a true disciple is not having a Spotify worship playlist, wearing a cross or fish round your neck, or even going to church occasionally. It's your attitude towards this set of books – not just reading it but putting it into practice and teaching others to do the same, in our words and our actions. Now that doesn't mean we're required to go all Leviticus and offer sacrifices or avoid eating shellfish or knock down our houses if we've got a mould problem. But it does mean we've got to grasp the principles that undergird those practices, obey them, and encourage others to do so, too.

Or as Jacob, Jesus' younger brother, puts it in his letter, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it? Says."

Which leads us onto ...

4) Heart-changingly deep. "For unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees and the scribes, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."

The Pharisees went to extremes to prove how righteous they were (and better than everyone else) – so Jesus' listeners may well have been thinking, "How are we supposed to compete with *that*?" Christians too have struggled with it, over the centuries. But here's the thing: the righteousness of the Pharisees was all surface level. Sure, they worked hard at *looking* righteous, but the motives of many were corrupt. They were, to quote Jesus later, a bunch of 'whitewashed tombs.' What Jesus is saying here is, "Your righteousness has got to go deeper. Much deeper. As deep as your heart."

So how do we do that? On our own, we can't.

But in His death Jesus offers us His righteousness, and by His Spirit, He can change us – from the inside, out. *That's* how.

Get It Right

So that's the way we're supposed to read the Bible, according to the One it's really all about. In a Christ-centred, eternally binding, personally followed, heart-changingly deep, way.

And why does it matter? Because plenty of people have got it wrong, over the centuries. I don't just mean reading the Bible like it's some kind of physics or chemistry or biology textbook (which some people have, and it isn't). What I mean is using it to justify cruelty and injustice and oppression in a way that is light years from what the Bible is all about; from what the kingdom of God is all about; from what Jesus Himself is all about. Or using it as a trump card, quoting it or waving it (or holding it upside down) to manipulate others and achieve power over them.

It happened in Jesus' day. It's still happening, now.

As 21st century followers of Jesus, we need to make sure we interpret it, *His* way.

So, read the Bible. Read it well. Give your time and attention to it. Study it on your own; study it with others. Make it a hobby; an activity you can't get enough of. Build your life and faith on it. Both NT and OT.

Because the Bible mattered to Jesus (and it still does!).

It should matter to us, too.