

Scripture: Our Guide for Faith and Life

II Timothy 3:14-17

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Well, thank you very much, musicians. It's just great to be part of a church that has a lot of musical riches and the capacity to have, I'll say, very familiar hymns sound new and fresh and also hear music perhaps we've never heard before. Thank you very much. The evenings I'm with you have been mixed. I'll say there's always something I'm supposed to do. I have to do. I have to, you know, say a word at the Christmas celebration and I have to say a word at the ordination of the officers. And now I'm on my own. I get to do whatever I want within limits, of course. And so I decided if I could, to continue, I'll say I declared that I began a series from the pastoral Pistols last time I was with you, when we were doing new officers, we studied what an elder and a deacon does, and we're going to spend a few weeks in Timothy first and second. And I thought, for foundational ideas. There's nothing more important than understanding the Word of God, and I hope that I can state what you know and perhaps bring you something a little bit new or fresh in application at least.

So, our text today is II Timothy 3: 14, 17. But I do want to read two passages. The first one is very short from the Gospel of John: 17 -- Jesus is with His disciples and praying for them, and He prays to the Father simply these words. *Sanctify them in the truth. Your word is truth.*

And then Peter, one of the people who gives us Scripture, wrote this about how Scripture comes to us, and it comes from II Timothy 1:19-21. And I'll read it to you.

And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed to which you would do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

Knowing this, first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. No prophecy was ever produced by the will of man. But men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. And then this word is perhaps more familiar from Timothy.

But as for you, (Paul says to Timothy) continue on what you've learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out (Some translations say inspired) by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness that the man of God may be complete equipped for every good work.

Let's pray for just a moment. Give us Lord understanding of what your Word is. And then, Lord, beyond that, we ask for the graces to take it to heart, which is sometimes for us, a different matter. Give us humility as we hear from you any time we read your word, we pray in Jesus' name.

I want to begin with an account of a man named Augustine. Some people call him Augustine, but Augustine was a man on the rise in the early 5th century, late 4th century A.D. in the Christian era. He was upper class. He was well-educated, he was brilliant, ambitious and well-connected. His chosen field was rhetoric. Rhetoric is an obscure field today. In those days, it was the best way to have a great career in academia, if you were so inclined. Rhetoricians trained the elites to present their case in court and in public for debates. If you reached the top, which he had by the age of 30, teaching at the equivalent of

Harvard, it was called the University of Milan at the time, where the emperor most of the time held his court. Augustine had it made. He had reached the pinnacle at an early age, and he also got to do whatever he wanted, because if you taught rhetoric, you could gather information from any field because you never knew who would need to know what and how they might need to arrange it. And so he was able to study natural science and history and philosophy and religion and literature. And consequently, because Christianity was growing and growing in those days, he studied the Bible before he was a Christian, he studied the Bible for ten years. He went to church week by week. He went to this single most important church in the Roman Empire at the time, led by a man named Ambrose, who's not very famous today, but was certainly one of the great lights of the early church. He wrote hymns. We still sing, and he preached at the church that royal people who are Christians would go to. Augusta was famous enough that Ambrose met with Augustine on multiple occasions, one on one, because he wanted, if possible, to mentor this young man. But Augustine had a problem. He said he was a slave to two things. He had two mistresses, he had an actual mistress, and he had his career and he did not want to give up either one.

One day, an official named Ponticianus, came to visit him in his villa and noticed that Augustine, like a good scholar, had books everywhere, handwritten, by the way, not printed, and Ponticianus at random picked up a little something just to see what it was, and was surprised to see that Augustine was reading the book of Romans. He said, I didn't know you're a Christian. Augustine said, I'm not. Ponticianus said may I tell you the story of Anthony? Anthony was a nobleman, much like Augustine himself, much like Ponticianus who in the year 250 became a believer, radically so, sold everything, gave up his career, gave up his family, became a monk, and gathered people to himself in the wilderness in Egypt.

Augustine said that hearing this story Ponticianus made him love Ponticianus even more, and he was filled with reproach for himself because he knew Christianity was true. He knew that it was true. He had given it his full mental consent, but he was not following Christ because he had these lovers, his career and a concubine. And so he fled his villa in a massive outpouring of tears. But for some reason, (scholars are prone to do this kind of thing) as he left in tears, he grabbed the book and he took it with him. It was the scroll of the book of Romans. He sat down under a tree, held the book weeping, and he heard some children playing nearby. They were saying togliere, togliere which means take and read, take and read which he understood to be a children's game. But he decided to take it as a word from God for himself. And so, he opened the book of Romans at random and came to the place where it said, *Put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts*. He said, I neither wanted nor needed to read any further. He gave his life to Christ at that moment. He was living with a man, a friend, a scholar like himself, a man also on the rise, roughly his age, late twenties, 29 or so named Olympias who was in the same struggle. He came out and prayed also with this friend and the two of them became Christians and quickly gave their life over to the study of God's Word, to the teaching of God's Word and within a few years they were serving the church not only full time, but in leadership positions and rapidly became Bishops in the church. Augustine, of course, one of the handful of most influential Christians of all time.

Now, you may say that's no, that's no good conversion story. That's not how it's supposed to work. You're not supposed to, you know, go like this and put your finger in the Bible and become a Christian because you read Romans 13:14. But he'd been studying the Bible for ten years. He'd been going to church for years. He was already convinced he just needed one last thing to push him over the edge. And he heard it from someone that he felt loved him, Ponticianus. That's essential, isn't it? If you're going to hear a message from someone, if you're going to deliver a message, it certainly helps to be loved when

someone corrects you. And if you want to correct someone, it really helps to love them. And so he received what Ponticianus had to say. He meditated on Scripture.

That's what I want to talk about in a way. What is scripture? Basically two points. What is the Bible and how do we get the most out of it? That's what I'm going to talk about.

Now I want to tell you what the Bible is. It's God's Word - infallible, inerrant, inspired, but you've got to read it carefully. It's not enough to say this is God's word. You have to read it and meditate on it. Think about it. Now. You may say, well, I think about everything I read. When I read an interesting article in the Wall Street Journal, I meditate and contemplate whether this is something that would shape me or not. And that's fine. I'm not against that. But The Wall Street Journal, no matter how true it might be in one particular article, never has the potency of God's word. How shall we say it? There can be a perfectly true weather forecast and every word is true, but it doesn't necessarily help your soul. So, the Bible says that God's Word is truth. Jesus says in one place *your word is truth*. It's also in the prayer In John 17, I read to you -- Jesus' prays to the Father, *your word is truth*. He tells God that because God is the God of truth and He gives us the Gospel which the New Testament calls on several occasions, the Gospel of truth or the word of truth.

And so here, the traits that we ascribe to scripture –

We do say the Bible is **inspired**. Now, of course, the problem is that inspired has a couple of meanings. You can have inspired defense in a football team or basketball team, and it means you're working very hard and you're doing your very best. And that's not what the word inspired means. The word translated correctly by our ESV is *breathed out by God*. God's breath – it came from God through the Apostles and the prophets whom God chose to equip them. But it's God's word. Men are moved. They're carried along, as Peter said, by the Spirit.

Number two, it is also, of course, **inerrant**. It has no mistakes because God is true at His word is truth and not only true, but **the** word of truth.

It's also, and maybe most importantly for us, **infallible**, which means it cannot fail. It's not simply true. It's true and unfailing. If God makes a promise, he will keep that promise. You can count on it. If he says this is the way humans were made and this is the destiny of humans, it is reliably true that this is how people have been created. Now, when Paul speaks to Timothy, he says, I'm telling you what the word of God is – it is breathed out by God. That's for 16. But before that, he says, Listen, you know this. You were taught these things from childhood. Now, Timothy did not have entirely Christian relatives, but his mother and grandmother taught him the word of God from his childhood. And he learned what the Bible's all about. It makes you wise unto with the goal of salvation. That's the main purpose. That's the primary purpose. And everything else flows through that, because salvation is freedom from God's judgment, God's wrath from damnation. But salvation is also as broad as life. The word *save* in the Bible does mean saved from God's wrath, but it also means to be redeemed globally having your whole life transformed. The Scripture is God's Word. It's breathed out, and all scriptures are breathed out by God, He means the words of Moses as surely as the words of Jesus, the words of the prophets who wrote books like I and II Chronicles as surely as I Corinthians or Luke.

Men were carried along. Peter says. It means that they sat down to write and they wrote better than they knew - better than they could imagine. I'll just say as an author, sometimes two or three sentences

can take forever. It's like a battle with the page in the computer. I can't get the words right, and other times the words just flow out. It just pours out word after word, page after page. Now, that's a human experience and it's an echo of what God does when He can read the prophets and the apostles along. They had skills, they had interest, they were eyewitnesses. God had spoken to them. And then the Lord used their skills, their interest. He formed them and used them according to their skills and interests and then purged any misconceptions they had so that even if they had a wrong idea, it didn't make it to the page. Right? So we can count on it. It's reliable. Luke, for example, says he carefully investigated everything from the beginning so we could be sure about the things that we've been taught. Now, what that means is Luke had a historical interest. He did research. If he heard something that was wrong from somebody, he did more research. If it didn't sound right and if he heard conflicting stories, the Holy Spirit guided him to the true account of what Jesus said or did. Scripture then comes to us inspired, breathed out by God, and it is also next profitable or useful or beneficial.

It's **beneficial** in its teaching. Now, when Paul says it's beneficial in its teaching, the word teaching in Paul's letters usually means teaching of doctrine, not just things on his mind, but the great truths of the faith, the apostolic message that is preserved and passed on and written down. And that equips people. And just walking through the text here a little bit with you. And if you follow along, I'm going to almost hit every word for a couple of moments at least.

So it is breathed out by God. It is **profitable** for teaching. And then next it says it's profitable for reproof. Now the word reproof is in the realm of pointing out people's faults, but it's in the realm of pointing them out so that they will see the logic or the reasoning. It is coming alongside someone and saying, Don't you see? Can't you get this point with me? This is an error and we need to walk away from that error. So it's teaching as positive doctrine and reproof is correcting misconceptions.

The next word that he uses is **correction**. Now correction, you said, well, you just said correction, but the first two are about ideas and the next two are about ways of life. So correction means more pointing out a moral error or an error in somebody's way of life, like telling a child you should not hit your sister like that. You might be able to hit your sister, but not like that. You can hit your sister playfully, but don't hurt your sister.

Number 4, for **training and righteousness**. That's the positive. So we have two positives at the beginning, the end in the middle, we have two negatives. It's positive teaching and training and righteousness. It's doctrine or ideas and then a way of life first, the last, and in the middle it's correcting false ideas and correcting a false way of life. We have everything we need, the true, the false ideas and behavior.

That's what God's Word gives us. It gives us all that we need. Now, not everybody is as enthusiastic about that. One of my friends that one of his books said today, there are so many people who are looking for a safe place. They're looking for a place where they will not be offended, but they won't be frightened where they can be safe from anything that will upset their sensibilities. And the church in that sense of the word, is not a safe place. Correction is unwelcomed in many circles, but sinners need correction. And we would say the church is in radically safe places should be the safest place, and I trust generally is the safest place for men and women and children to live. But it's not safe if all you want is to be told you're awesome and there's nothing wrong with you at all. God's word both instructs and corrects your ideas and your behavior -- it trains us in righteousness. What that means is if the word of God has made you wise for salvation, you're right with God and God intends by His word taught whether one or in groups or sermons. He intends to save us as we are, but not to leave us as we are.

If you have a friend who's an alcoholic or a drug addict or philandering or cheating in his business, you can say truthfully to that friend the Lord loves you and will receive you exactly as you are. He loves you and will call you his child exactly as you are, but he won't leave you as you are. Who would ever want to have a friend who's an alcoholic and simply leave them there? If you really care about them, you try to get them to live a new way, a better way. And so God also wants us to change.

I think I mentioned this a few weeks ago. There are two kinds of love we have to have in our minds -- transforming love and accepting love. We begin. The Christian life begins with accepting love. God accepts us as we are cross as children, even if we're flawed and defective. But once we're solid with God with regard to his acceptance, then he starts to transform us. This is essential to all life in the family of God and of the human family. We accept other people as they are, but we don't leave them as they are.

Let me make this a little more practical. Suppose they're one of these people who, I don't know, fit the absentminded professor category, which I sometimes do. And I spent with some time with someone today - I won't mention them, but someone who might possibly fit the absentminded professor category. An absent minded professors do funny things sometimes.

So we might do things like, like put a dish in the microwave and leave a fork on the dish. And if you leave a fork on the dish, very bad things happen in the microwave. And you should you should you should not accept that if you're married to an absent minded professor, you say, get that walked out of there now.

But the same absentminded professor may also have a propensity to not look at his teeth before he goes out and, you know, wander into the wilderness or meetings with spinach between his teeth or maybe a chunk of carrots hanging from his ears or something along those lines. And the spouse in this case does not have a right to say immediately get that spinach out of there, you have to weigh it. You don't want to hector your spouse. You don't want to be constantly correcting every mistake that they make because then they'll feel burdened and unloved. Right? So we love and we accept, we have transforming love and we have accepting love. Scripture reproves us and corrects us. It points out our mistakes. That's so good for us. As you know, I'm a parent and I'm also a grandparent. And one of the most important things a parent can do is convey to a child, I love you and I correct you. I love you so much that I will not let you persist in behavior that would hurt you. The way you're behaving with your friends, you might say to a three year old or seven year old or a nine year old, the way you're behaving with your friends is going to make you lose your friends. And I don't want that to happen to you. I love you too much to let that happen to you. If you conduct yourself on a regular basis the way you did at your friend's house yesterday or today, your not going to be invited to people's houses anymore. And I tell you this because I love you. Correction is an act of love, but it must be done with love.

So we accept, even as reprove false ideas. I speak to you pastorally. There's a man named Thomas Jefferson as one of the most talented and capable and important people in our nation, and he taught desperately dangerous things. He said all people are born within an inalienable right to pursue their happiness. This is a false and destructive idea. We do not have an inalienable right to pursue our happiness. That idea has led to the breakup of hundreds of thousands, if not millions of marriages, because we think, T.J., (that's what I like to call him, to kind of bring him down a notch) was right in his thinking. People actually think the Bible says this. I've met so many people who think the Bible says God wants me to be happy. I said, no, that's Thomas Jefferson. He was an atheist. They think the Bible says that.

I saw a movie not terribly long ago because it put one of the novels of Elena Ferrante, one of the great novelists of our day, who I didn't want to read the novel, to be honest with you. So I watched the movie. It wasn't a very good movie, but it was a movie about a woman who felt trapped by her love of her career and her desire to rise in her career and her very needy children. And so she left them. She left because she was so unhappy. Now we had to be very tender toward people who are deeply unhappy. We must be kind and supportive and helpful and listen and give them all the help we can and not condemn them for feeling unhappy. But we must also say that doesn't give you the right to abandon your children. And if Thomas Jefferson gave you the idea, then I need to correct we need to correct was Thomas Jefferson said-- it's not true that we have an inalienable right to happiness. What do we have? We have in the Bible what we need. We have training and righteousness. We have doctrine, true doctrine presented teaching, and we have false doctrine corrected. We have right living and we have false living, corrected. We have creed and conduct. We have positive and negative. We have everything we need.

John Stott said this about the Bible. *Do we help to overcome error and grow in truth, to overcome evil and to grow in holiness? Then it is to Scripture we must turn for it is the chief means God employs to bring God's people to maturity.*

And now, for the practical part, I want to give you four words, and I'm inviting you to maybe even say them with me. I know we don't usually do that. We sing together. We don't talk together in church. I don't know why that is, but we're going to do it. I'm going to give you four words. They are **read, meditate, pray and live**. Now that little summary is a formulation on how to profit from God's word.

So, the first thing you do is you **read** it, but you have to read it, of course, accurately. You put it in context. You study the words. You want to make sure you know what this word means. It's careful reading, proper reading according to the rules of interpretation, the Bible and Lord willing, this summer or in the early fall, at some point or other, I'm going to have a little seminar for all of you about how to get more accurate in your reading the Bible. Hope some of you will come.

Then you have to **meditate**. You have to turn it over in your mind and that's a little bit harder. And a man named Eugene Peterson said this about the hazards of reading the Bible, and especially the hazards of reading the Bible if you're somebody who reads the Bible to teach or preach on a regular basis, he said this - we (that this is a professional and fervent Bible study people, leaders, teachers) pick up the Bible and find that we have God's Word in our hands, and now we can handle it. He says it is easy to suppose that we are in control of it, that we can use it, that we can oversee its use whenever and wherever and to whomever we wish. Every job has its problems. Truck drivers have back problems and people hunched over a computer all day get tight between the shoulders, and pastors and teachers can have a sense that they control the Bible too much -- more than they really do. So what do we do? We **read and meditate and pray and live**. Now, when I say meditate, what I mean is after you study what the Bible says, you think about it. You spend time alone with it.

So let me give you an example. This is something I teach from time to time. It's from Matthew 5:22 where Jesus says these words. *But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother (raca) will be liable to judgment; whoever insults (raca) his brother will be liable to the council and whoever says You fool! will be liable to the hell of fire.*

So as a New Testament professor, I can tell you what that means. The first word, "raca" means empty head, moron, stupid, idiot, airhead, fluff head, imbecile. That's what it means. I insult your head. The second word "raca" means you have no heart. I insult your heart. Empty head. Empty heart. That's what those two words mean. The next thing I have to do is meditate on it. Because after I study this, I go driving somewhere and some idiot cuts me off in traffic. What's wrong with it? Idiot doesn't even know what a merge sign is or a yield sign. Merge and yield are not the same thing. You see a yield sign? You think it means merge? You almost ran into me, you idiot. Now I just read this but I did not meditate and apply it to my life. And if I'm muttering idiot at people in traffic or in other parts of life, I probably need to pray that I stop doing that so I can live what I know, which is you shouldn't call people in your mind or in your heart empty head or empty heart because it counts. When you start despising people, you never know where it may end. I mean, honestly, last week was pro-life Sunday, right? Why do people abort the unborn? Because they decide that life isn't worth anything much or its worth is lower than the cost. And so we dispense with that life. We're saying about that life it is worth less, which is not all that far from calling somebody raca or fool.

We going to meditate on that. Now, this isn't easy and we make a lot of mistakes. That's why we pray. That's why we pray. Lord, teach me, Lord, show me my mistakes. It can be very simple. Things like Jesus says take up your cross and follow me and then we need to pray. Lord, show me where I need to be willing to sacrifice for the people around me.

But I'm to give you a more personal one. As we draw near to our end. And Chad knows this is coming. And so Chad, whom I'm getting to know a little bit, is going to help me enact the scene. Come on up, Chad. That occurred in India in the year 1997 when I was in India. And he knows he knows what's coming. So you're just going to stand there for a second. So I when I went to India, it's a very long flight. We have engine problems. It took forever. And I read huge swaths of scripture among the swathes of scripture. I read a lot of book of proverbs included a proverb that says *A gentle answer turns away wrath*. I read that. I thought about it on the plane, and then I'm teaching all morning at a seminary in India. And at night it's so public lectures. And in the afternoon we get to do whatever we want. And so they want us to have a good time because, you know, they want us to enjoy our time as much as we can, while working. And one day we're at the foothills, the Himalayas. We went to a cemetery where British officers during the period of the colonial times went when they got tuberculosis, and the hope was they would recover in the cool air. But they didn't recover. They died. And so we're looking at the tombs of generals and colonels and majors and so forth. And while we're doing that, there's nobody there to take funds or anything. And so we just are walking around. And then this guy comes charging toward us, accusing us of breaking in, of being grave robbers and thieves and miscreants of the worst sort in my host is a diminutive and kindhearted man rolls right up to him and they are just a little closer. They are screaming at each other. They're just spit spray screaming at each other for about 2 minutes. And then after that time, it's more like shouting from here and that lasts about 45 seconds. And then suddenly everything's very calm and they're patting each other on the shoulder. And I say to another host, actually, the young son of the person who was doing the screaming, what is going on now? And he said, now, the caretaker is inviting us to tea. And my father is graciously declining because the water is probably dangerous. But he doesn't want to say that because he wants to honor the man.

So what happened in this episode is, of course, that I said, okay, explain, explain this kindhearted, gentle person. And Christians know we're not supposed to shout at each other, Why are you screaming each other? And he said, Look, in India, it's very simple. The custom is if you're guilty, you're quiet, and if

you're innocent, you protest loudly and forcefully in the face of your accuser. That's the way you say my motives are pure. And I said, okay, my mind is completely blown here because I was just reading that *a gentle answer turns away wrath*, and this was anything but a gentle answer. People were screaming at each other. And so what I did was meditate, and I realized what God wants us to do with *a gentle answer turns away wrath* is not so much control your volume but get your goals right.

So I'm just going to tell you my dad was a yeller. He yelled big time. And so I said, I'm never going to yell at my kids, which I was pretty close. I mean, of course I raised my voice occasionally, but I was not a yeller with my kids at all. In fact, one day I heard my kids say to each other, We're in trouble now. Dad is really mad. He's whispering.

I began to search the scriptures and I happened to be spending time with an Old Testament scholar named Bruce Waltke, one of the great authors of our age and I said, Bruce, tell me, am I on the right track here? He said I was. He said it has nothing to do with volume. It's a gentle answer, not a soft it's not a not a low volume answer. But any answer that brings gentleness, it brings healing. That's what the text is saying. And that of course, that, of course, helped me to understand. I saw other people live it out in an unexpected way. And that taught me that when I communicate, my goal is to turn away wrath. The is not to be below 75 decibels. The goal is to turn my wrath. The goal is to win people, to woo people, to be together. When you have to say difficult things, read, meditate, pray and live. Are you willing to do that? Are you willing to do that if you are? So the words for me again, Let's read, meditate, pray and live.

Of course, we fail to live. We know that. And that's why this is a church. This is not an ethical society in which we tell people what to do and we're done. We say, this is what God wants us to do, and then we come back to what the Bible is all about. It makes us wise unto salvation by faith in Christ. So as you, my friends, brothers and sisters read, meditate, pray, and live, one of the things you'll notice is you're not meditating and you're not living. Which doesn't mean you're under God's condemnation. It means here we are, church. We turn again to the Gospel, to the Word of God's grace, and we give thanks for that. And after we repent and strive to live after repenting, we say, Lord, by your grace, help me live. Thank you for accepting me as I am. And please transform me.

Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, I thank you for word for the privilege of living, of working and serving, of joining people in a church that believes your word is inspired and fallible and without error and teaches us doctrine and corrects our errors. We thank you that we stand together in these things. We pray now, Lord, that you would send us off into the evening with all of your love, with of your peace, assured that we are your sons and daughters, and we pray it in Jesus name, Amen.