

PEOPLE OF THE BOOK 6-25-17

Matthew 4

As I was thinking what to preach on the Sunday after Vacation Bible School, I was struck by the name of the ministry and the week that just passed. It is called *Bible School*. Mind you the kids did a lot of things, but the name suggest that all of it found its purpose in teaching children the Bible. So, that is what I want to talk about with you today. But, before we get to reading the Bible we start with a statement found in Ed Wheat's book, *Love Life for Every Married Couple*. It is a statement which represents well the thinking of many, if not most, in our culture. Here it is, "*Just because I married the wrong man for all the wrong reasons, does that mean we should stay together to make it right? We prayed for years for our feelings to change, for our marriage to change. We saw counselors and went to seminars. Still we found we disliked each other more and more. Rather than continue to tear each other down, after five years of marriage we decided to get a divorce. It was the lesser of two evils. Either decision would have been painful. I feel guilty, thanks especially to the church's attitude, but I also feel that God understands.*" Here is my question for today - how did this woman come to the conclusion that God understands and apparently approves of her decision to divorce? What is the basis for that claim?

A book I read many years ago is Chuck Colson's *Kingdoms in Conflict* which begins with a mini-novel about an American president named *Hopkins* faced with a foreign crisis pertaining to Israel. Well, Hopkins, in the novel, was wrestling with what to do. His chief of staff, Larry Parrish, observes the president's deliberations and is disturbed. Colson writes, "*Parrish didn't understand the currents moving in Hopkin's mind on the Israeli situation. He had left the president just an hour before, staring into a big, brown Bible open before him. Parrish told himself it was perfectly reasonable for a president to draw strength from the Bible at such a time. What bothered him was that Hopkins didn't seem to be reading his Bible for strength. He seemed to be looking for directions.*" My! That is alarming isn't it? To have a President looking for directions from Scripture?!

In the early part of the 16th century a young man named Martin entered a monastery in Germany, submitting himself to the most rigorous discipline one could imagine. A moment came, five years into his experience as a monk, when it was announced that two of the brothers would be selected to represent their monastery at a great convention in the holy city of Rome. To his

excitement, Martin Luther was chosen to go. Now, Martin understood the theological implications of this rare opportunity for him to go personally to the eternal city. He knew the teachings of the church that there were certain privileges granted by the power of the church for anyone who made a pilgrimage to Rome. In fact, to go thru certain exercises in Rome one could guarantee the release of a soul from Purgatory. Luther was so excited about this he later said that he was disappointed that his mother and father were still alive, because if either of them had been dead he could have guaranteed their release from Purgatory on this trip to Rome. So, he decided to dedicate this trip to his grandfather whose soul he hoped to free from Purgatory. When in Rome, Luther experienced the most profound disappointment of his life. Rather than finding there great devotion and piety he discovered scandalous immorality and a crass materialism among the priests. But he still held out hope for his moment of glory when he would go to the Lateran church across from St. Peter's to make his pilgrimage up the Scala Santa, the holy stairs, which presumably were the same stairs mounted to the palace of Pontius Pilate, the stairs which Jesus walked to judgement. This sacred relic was considered so holy to the church that to crawl up the stairs on one's knees, stopping at each of the 28 steps to kiss it and say the Lord's Prayer, would guarantee that a soul of one's choice would be immediately snatched from Purgatory into heaven. So, dutifully, Luther went about his task. He knelt at the first step, said the Our Father, and proceeded to do the same at each step, all the way, ascending to the top of the 28 stairs and when he rose from his task on the top of the stairs he said out loud these words, "Who knows if it is true?"

In each of these three accounts we are faced with a most critical question. How do we determine truth? In Luther's day it was generally agreed that the church determines truth. Whatever the church said was right. But, since the Reformation, few believe that. Modern Roman Catholics as often disagree with their church as agree. Protestants abandoned the notion of an infallible church long ago. In our day, that is not a leading method of determining truth. But the problem still remains. Where do we find truth, how do we reach decisions? And there are essentially three schools in western culture. The school of Faith, the school of Feelings, the school of Fads. Some of us make decisions based on faith and a holy book that we consider to be authoritative. Others make decisions based on intuition and feelings. Still others make decisions based on polls and popular opinion. What is it for you? And what should it be for Christians? Many assume that religious people, Christians included, believe what they believe because they want to. The idea of an authoritative book or any authority outside of self is foreign to them. And that is one of the most

critical points of distinction between peoples. Are they guided by feelings or are they people of the book? Let me add another one to the mix? Are you a person of feelings, a person of the polls or a person of the book? Go back to the story of the president. How should a civil officer rule? Should he follow his heart? Do what feels right deep down? Or should he follow the polls, doing what the people apparently think?

This is a question of major importance that will affect everything about you, and understand, our society today is largely given over to its passions and its polling. We are hyper-democratized and act as though the results of polls and surveys will render what is true. The Supreme Court's ruling in the Obergefell case in 2015 that mandated the legalization of same-sex marriages was clearly such a case. What changed that led to this blockbuster judgment? Did the eyes of five justices finally get opened to the true meaning of the constitution? Or did five of the nine base their decision on shifts in popular opinion? Polls reflected a shift. Polls won out. Or maybe we are given over to our feelings, whims and desires. Advertisers understand this and waste little time appealing to the intellect. Advertisers understand that men and women make decisions based on impulse and association more than rationality and authority. That is why commercials seek to give impressions, not reasons. In the same way then one's positions on ethics and politics and theology usually express one's inner child, instead of expressing mature reasoning or research. Am I saying that one way is better than another? Would I be so narrow minded and bigoted as to suggest that there are right ways to think and wrong ways to think? Isn't this just a right brain, left brain kind of issue? Isn't it just a matter of personality, not righteousness? And shouldn't we just all learn to come to our own decisions in our own unique way?

The point of the sermon, which finally, I am coming to is that Christians must be people of the book. We must not be like the woman who justified her choices from a view of God that was based on feelings. We must not be like that chief of staff who was afraid of someone who got directions from a book. We must be like President Hopkins in the story, and like Martin Luther. After Luther asked, "Who knows if it is true?" he returned to the monastery and got busy answering his own question. And you know what he did to answer it? You know where he looked for truth? In the Scriptures. He became a man of the book. Christians must be. We cannot live by the polls; we cannot live by feelings. We must be those who gain our view of the world from Scripture because the One we follow, the One whose name we bear as Christians was Himself a man of the book. On your outline this is reason #1 to be people of the book - because of what God said about Scripture

thru Jesus. In Matthew 4 Jesus encounters Satan in the wilderness and there He fights him off while displaying His own view of Scripture. The devil came and said, “Turn these stones into bread.” And Jesus said what? Let me take a poll? Or let me pray about it? No, he said, “It is written.” Then the devil says to throw himself down from the temple so God will save him. Again, Jesus appeals to what for his decision not to? 8 of 10 theologians say... No, he says, *It is written*. And finally he says to Satan, “Listen, I don’t have any peace over what you are asking me to do?” No, he says **10** *Then Jesus said to him, "Go, Satan! For it is written, 'YOU SHALL WORSHIP THE LORD YOUR GOD, AND SERVE HIM ONLY.'*” Was Jesus a man of polls, a man of feelings or a man of the book? In Matthew 22 Jesus is in a debate with the Sadducees who ask him a tricky question about marriage in the heavenly kingdom. How does Jesus answer? Matthew 22:**29-31** *But Jesus answered and said to them, "You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures nor the power of God. 30 "For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. 31 "But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God.* And then he quotes Exodus, **32-33** *'I AM THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, AND THE GOD OF ISAAC, AND THE GOD OF JACOB'?* *He is not the God of the dead but of the living.*” **33** *When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at His teaching.* Jesus there makes a big to do over the present tense of the linking verb “am.” Huh? What do you know? He argues his point from the exact language of a portion of ancient holy writ. He is preeminently a man of the book. A few verses later Jesus challenges the Pharisees to think, not to think intuitively or popularly but Scripturally **41-43** *Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question: 42 "What do you think about the Christ, whose son is He?" They said to Him, "The son of David." 43 He said to them, "Then how does David in the Spirit call Him 'Lord,' saying,* and He quotes Psalm 110. **44-46** *'THE LORD SAID TO MY LORD, "SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND, UNTIL I PUT YOUR ENEMIES BENEATH YOUR FEET"'?* **45** *"If David then calls Him 'Lord,' how is He his son?" 46 No one was able to answer Him a word, nor did anyone dare from that day on to ask Him another question.* Jesus was a Master of the book of God. He saw the Old Testament as God’s very word to man. Mark 7:**5-8** *The Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?" 6 And He said to them, "Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME. 7 'BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.' 8 "Neglecting the*

*commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men." Jesus accuses them of making decisions based on the wrong thing, in their case religious tradition. **9-13** He was also saying to them, "You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition. 10 "For Moses said, 'HONOR YOUR FATHER AND YOUR MOTHER'; and, 'HE WHO SPEAKS EVIL OF FATHER OR MOTHER, IS TO BE PUT TO DEATH'; 11 but you say, 'If a man says to his father or his mother, whatever I have that would help you is Corban (that is to say, given to God),' 12 you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or his mother; 13 thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that."*

From what we have read, where does Jesus look for truth, where does He expect us to find truth? Being men and women of the book is not a Western thing, it is not a Presbyterian thing, it is not a left brain thing - it is a Jesus thing. In Luke 24, post-resurrection Jesus encounters these two depressed disciples walking to Emmaus, lamenting the loss of their hopes and dreams. Jesus knew they were mistaken so how does he direct them in their thinking? Does He say, "Look into your hearts and there you will find that your dreams are still alive, your Jesus really lives." No. Luke 24: **25** *He said to them, "O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! He points them to the book again. **27** Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.*

My proposition is this. As Christians, we, like Christ, must strive to be led not by our feelings, not by our culture, not by our tradition but by the written word of God which is given as our authority, as our key to truth and reality. On your outline go to the reason for being people of the book #2. Reason #2 is what God said about the Scripture when it was first given. God gave us this book to be our guide and our rule. Let's go back to when the Scriptures were first given, the time of Moses. See what God said it was to be used for. Deuteronomy 17, Moses speaks of the future kings of the Old Covenant people, **14-18** *"When you enter the land which the LORD your God gives you, and you possess it and live in it, and you say, 'I will set a king over me like all the nations who are around me,' 15 you shall surely set a king over you whom the LORD your God chooses, {one} from among your countrymen you shall set as king over yourselves; you may not put a foreigner over yourselves who is not your countryman. 16 "Moreover, he shall not multiply horses for himself, nor shall he cause the people to return to Egypt to multiply horses, since the LORD has said to you, 'You shall never again return that way.' 17 "He shall not multiply wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; nor shall he greatly increase silver and gold for himself.*

18 "Now it shall come about when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. You got that? The king was to make his own hand drawn copy of the Scriptures. God wasn't concerned that the king get in touch with his inner child. He wasn't concerned that the king poll the people to see what was popular. He was concerned that the King be a man of the Book. **19-20** *It shall be with him and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, by carefully observing all the words of this law and these statutes, 20 that his heart may not be lifted up above his countrymen and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, to the right or the left, so that he and his sons may continue long in his kingdom in the midst of Israel.* Did God expect His word to be helpful and inspirational? Or did He expect it also to be the rule for faith and practice in Israel? You know what it says. Joshua 1. Young Joshua has taken over now for Moses and the Lord meets with him. God tells him the key for good leadership and what do you expect that is? Does God say, "Joshua, you are about to lead the Children of Light into battle against the Evil Empire. I'll be with you so follow your heart. Is that it? Does God say, "Pray about what to do and I will tell you?" No, He says, Joshua 1:**7-8** *Only be strong and very courageous; be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, so that you may have success wherever you go. 8 "This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success.* God says, I've given you a book. Read it. Do it.

Now, I have talked down on what you might call subjectivism - that is the habit of finding truth and guidance in your own psyche, in your own feelings. I have contrasted that with following God's book, and I think I need to clarify my intentions. I am not saying that God is anti-feelings. I am not suggesting that God may not lead us subjectively, speak to us through our feelings put things in our hearts. I expect God does that. But the issue here is what is ultimate in your mind and heart? When there is conflict between the written word and your feelings what wins? Do you see the Bible as helpful and informative or binding and normative? If you feel like two men should be free to marry in the church but the Bible says otherwise what do you teach? If you feel like God should allow your friend to end her marriage but God's word says otherwise, what counsel do you give? That's the issue. I grant you that godly people are somewhat likely to have perspectives that coincide with those of God, but until glory we all need a check on our spirits. We cannot just go

with the gut, or follow our hearts. Those things ought to be consulted in a decision, but not given majority rule. They are flawed guides because we are flawed people. And this is still true when you pray. Too often the advice of Christians is simply to pray about a matter and then check your feelings. I'm all for prayer. We ought to pray for wisdom but we ought to study for it too, not just pray and check our feelings. Our feelings change, our opinions change. That is why we need an unchanging book. Those without that have their feet firmly planted in midair. There is nothing to check their emotions and give them balance.

On the other hand, we should note that having a book and being people of the book doesn't solve all our problems. It does not eliminate all our questionings and uncertainties and it certainly does not do away with the need for wisdom and discernment. Fact is, that we all read the book with a certain bias don't we? II Peter 3:**15-16** *Regard the patience of our Lord as salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, 16 as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction.* Ah ha. There are people of the book who are still unstable, who will use the Bible wrongly and destructively. We have within ourselves the capacity to mangle God's good gift, to misinterpret it, to misapply it. Does that fact negate the benefit of it? By no means. I read that a Federal Appeals Court decided it is unconstitutional for the state of Texas to allow pregame prayers at athletic events. Their reasoning was that athletic events are not sufficiently solemn to make prayer constitutional. Does the constitution really set forth a principle like that? Of course not, but the constitution, like the Bible, is often abused, distorted, twisted and misapplied. Should we therefore get rid of it? God forbid. The meaning and application of written documents can be disputed but they are still far more reliable than anything else. Why, when you buy a house or car do you want a written contract? Does that make it impossible for you to be defrauded? No, but it makes it much more difficult doesn't it? Written documents are less open to distortion and twisting. That is why God graciously put in writing His word to man. It gives us stability thru the changes of life and the ebb and flow of cultures and generations. Isaiah 40:**8** *The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever.*

What is at stake in all of this? Why would I speak with passion about these things? My friend, listen to the words of the prophet Hosea who speaking for God said in 4:**6a** *My people perish for lack of knowledge.* What knowledge do you think he's talking about? It isn't medical

knowledge or environmental knowledge. It is knowledge of the Scriptures. **6b** *Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being My priest.* That is, your ignorance disqualifies you for service. **6de** *Since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.* Our kids are gonna pay because we have chosen to be people of feelings, people of impulse, people of polls rather than people of the Book. And we ourselves are going to remain lost and confused in a world that makes little sense to us because the guidebook of God has been left on the coffee table covered with dust. Hosea 4:**6a** *My people perish for lack of knowledge.* Brothers and Sisters, in your life, don't let it be so. Instead, do these two things today. (1) Dedicate your mind to the Lord Jesus Christ. That is, you say to Him, *"What you teach I will believe. Not my feelings, not my friends, not my church, not my society, not my government, not my professors. You are Lord of my mind."* Secondly, (2) Determine to let Scripture be the rule in your life. That means you read it and you read it not only for inspiration and motivation but also for information and direction. You come to God's word seeking not just help, but binding commands as well as promises from heaven.

Some would pretend to be wise, they would sigh and smile and say, "Just follow your heart." God says, "Follow my word." What will it be for you? One is romantic, the other is real. One sounds good, the other is good. One leads to confusion the other to order. One leads to life the other to death. Moses at the end of his life said this, Deuteronomy 32:**46-47a** *Take to your heart all the words with which I am warning you today, which you shall command your sons to observe carefully, even all the words of this law. 47 "For it is not an idle word for you; indeed it is your life."*