

Title: In Step with the Spirit: Let Scripture Read Us
Pastor Morgan Murray
West Valley Presbyterian Church

Last week we celebrated the Fourth of July by reflecting on freedom, specifically a biblical understanding of freedom. In Galatians 5:1 Paul says that freedom in Christ is not just about freedom from or freedom of, but freedom FOR.

Gal 5:1 NRSV

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

Our freedom is for a purpose. We are no longer constrained from the outside by forces requiring us – such that we either conform to them (which is law) or spend our time resisting them (which I called license). We are now free to be who God created us to be, which are people motivated by love. We are now free to love without limits. Paul says that when we live this way, we are keeping in step with the Spirit.

I thought I would need to one more sermon in order to describe what keeping in step with the Spirit might look like. But I was wrong. I need three! So for the rest of July we'll explore ways to cultivate a life that keeps in step with the Spirit.

Let scripture read us.
Let silence form us.
Let experience teach us.

If you grew up in a Protestant church, then the importance of reading scripture is something with which you are very familiar. Regular bible reading, having a quiet time, attending Sunday school and Bible studies... this is all part of the deal. This is especially true for Presbyterians. When I was a seminary intern at First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood, I was given an office at the very edge of the campus. And in that office was an enormous desk... and that desk originally belonged to Henrietta Mears who – among other things – was famous for writing the best-selling handbook “What the Bible is All About” and for developing one of the largest Sunday Schools in the world. She created “cradle-to-grave” curriculum that led to the founding of the publishing company Gospel Light. Being earnest students of the Bible is a huge part of our heritage, and is always the first of the five *solas* listed – *sola scriptura*, the doctrine that the Bible alone is the only reliable guide to life and faith in Jesus Christ.

So if I as a pastor, urge you to read your Bibles, then I am in safe territory. But hopefully you noticed that I didn't say that. I didn't say, “read your Bible.” I said, “Let the Bible read you.” Why is that difference important?

If I say, “read your Bible,” then it would be easy to make it an exercise in simply **being informed**. We can read the Bible to learn the stories, become familiar with the sayings, and keep track of key ideas. We can read the Bible, in other words, to try and be smarter. If there is anything Presbyterians like, it’s being smarter. We are all about being seen as smart and competent, especially when it comes to Biblical content.

But when I say, “let the Bible read you,” I am saying that it is an exercise in **being transformed**. I am inviting you to remember that we hold all of scripture to be inspired by God’s Holy Spirit. It is God’s breathed word, and we trust that immersing ourselves in scripture, taking it into ourselves, meditating on it, memorizing it, and ruminating on it will not just change our minds but also reshape our hearts.

Is it your habit to read the Bible, or let the Bible read you?

Let me press you a little further: Is it your habit to read the Bible, or is it your habit to read ABOUT the Bible? Many people who identify themselves as Christians don’t read the Bible, hardly at all. We know this. But it is also true that many faithful Bible loving Christians read very little Bible but read about the Bible. Daily devotionals, books by pastors and scholars and teachers, Bible study curriculum – we read lots of these. And then there are the preachers we listen to online, the conferences we attend, the hours of podcasts and radio programs. Talking about the Bible is not just incredibly popular. It’s big business.

Don’t get me wrong: I love all this stuff! It is great stuff! Anyone who knows me knows I love learning from other people about the Bible. But as a pastor I am increasingly convinced and convicted about the fact that the church is sick and weak, and that Christians are anxious and spiritually enemic because we are not hearing the Holy Spirit speak directly to us through God’s word. And why don’t we hear? Because we have learned to treat the Bible like

- a textbook for useful information,
- or a cookbook with quick easy steps to whip up happiness and success and blessing,
- or a reference book for quickly finding the right answers that confirm or prove something

Rarely – if ever – do we let scripture read us. If you are like most Christians, you only read the Bible occasionally and if you have the Bible in your life in any regular way, it is by sitting somewhere (in a pew, in the car, in front of a screen) where the Bible is read and explained to you by someone else.

Forgive me, but this is a lot like watching the Food Network as a substitute for making dinner, or watching an exercise video instead of going to the gym. Even professional Christians like me can fall into this. This sermon is directed at me, just as much as it is you – believe me!

The Spirit calls us to be apprentices of Christ. Instead we have settled for being spectators.

“Okay, Pastor Morgan. You’ve convinced me. Now what? How am I supposed to let scripture read me?” Glad you asked.

In another context and at another time, I would describe a way of meditating on scripture called Lectio Divina. But this morning I’m going to draw from something more familiar to us and our tradition: Inductive study, made so popular by ministries like InterVarsity.

For this practice, you will need:

A Bible,

A Journal,

A Plan,

A Friend (or better, two. Or better yet, a more experienced Christian)...

... And 15 minutes a day.

For the plan, start with reading half a chapter of the Gospel of Mark each day.

For each day’s reading, answer these three questions in your journal:

The classic InterVarsity questions:

What does this say?

What does this say to all Christians?

What is the Holy Spirit saying to you?

<expound on these questions a little, and describe what a one hour meeting with a friend or discipler would look like>

As an example of what this might look like, let’s take today’s passage – Galatians 5:1-15, which is a continuation of the verse we looked at last week.

Gal 5:1-15 NRSV

5:1 For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

2 Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. 3 Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law. 4 You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. 5 For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. 6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.

7 You were running well; who prevented you from obeying the truth? 8 Such persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. 9 A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough. 10 I am confident about you in the Lord that you will not think otherwise. But whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty. 11 But my friends, why am I still being persecuted if I am still preaching circumcision? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. 12 I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!

13 For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. 14 For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 15 If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

What does this say? What is it talking about?

After Paul founded the church in Galatia and left to continue his missionary work, apparently some Jewish Christians came to the city and accused Paul of omitting crucial parts of the Gospel by failing to tell the Galatians that they need to submit to Jewish laws and customs like circumcision. Paul rejects this because it would mean that we could earn God's favor through ritual practices, making Jesus Christ's "faith working through love" on the cross unnecessary and meaningless. This debate is creating division, animosity, and distrust within the community and Paul is furious about it.

Notice that no commentary or other outside source is needed to glean this. But it does take time, effort, and thought. Outside sources are great shortcuts, but remember:

**There are no shortcuts in relationships...
even and especially relationships with the Holy Spirit.**

What does this say to all Christians?

- *To live out their faith in Christ and the cross by serving one another sacrificially, treating their neighbor's welfare as if it were their very own.*
- *To do whatever it takes to maintain unity with one another, even and especially when outside forces try to pull us apart.*

What is the Holy Spirit saying to you, personally?

Last week I mentioned that the Holy Spirit convicted me about some self-deception, that led to me needing to confess sin, acknowledge how I'd hurt some people, ask for forgiveness, and live in a repentant, mind-changed way. In this text, at the time I prepped this sermon, I didn't hear such a clear call.

When the Holy Spirit speaks, the word tends to fall into at least one of four buckets:

Identity (God's or Ours)

Values

Attitudes

Behavior

I've included this four buckets on today's bulletin because they help us determine when it's the Holy Spirit, and when it's not. Here's what we often take from scripture when we aren't listening to the Holy Spirit:

“That’s interesting”
Should’s, Ought’s and Try Harder’s
How “we” are better than “them”

Sometimes the Holy Spirit says something to us loud and clear. Other times, maybe not so much. But that’s okay. Because maybe tomorrow it will. Even if I got three or four readings in this week, that’s four opportunities to let scripture read me and allow Christ-in-me to bring me into step with his Spirit.

When this is what is going on for us, we are falling back into our old habit of reading the Bible instead of letting the Bible read us. Maybe we get informed. But our goal now is to be transformed into the people God created us to be and to do what we long to do – love without limits and be part of God’s kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen.