

Introduction

I'd like to show you two things I have with me and then ask you a question about them. One is my favorite candy bar, depending on the day – a Milky Way. The other is the Bible. My question is this? What do the Milky Way and the Bible have in common? The answer is that they were both made to be eaten and that's what I'm going to preach about today – not eating the Milky Way but the Bible.

Eating the Bible

In Ezekiel chapters 2 and 3, God commissioned Ezekiel to prophecy and preach to the exiled Jews. Our text is part of that commission. Verses 9-10 mention a scroll, which represented God's word that He commissioned Ezekiel to preach. **"Lamentations," "mourning",** and **"woe"** describe the content of that scroll – judgment on the Jewish people. That its front and back were written on symbolized that Ezekiel was to add nothing to it and to take nothing away from it. He was to preach only the word God gave him and as He gave it.

Notice what God commanded him to do with the scroll, upon which He wrote His word. Eat it. That experience wasn't unique to him. Revelation 10:10 reveals that John ate God's written word as well. One of the best Bible commentators who ever lived, C.F. Keil, explained what that activity symbolized. Ezekiel was to **"receive into his innermost being the word of God presented to him."**

And so are we. Just as Ezekiel and John ate the written word God gave them, so we, metaphorically, are to eat the written word He gave us, the Bible. To eat the Bible, as C.F. Keil explained, means to receive it into our **"innermost being."** We internalize it so that it penetrates into and transforms our mental, emotional, volitional, and even bodily processes. That is the Bible's primary purpose, to transform how we think, feel, will, and act. And it will do just that if we eat it.

So, let's eat it, which involves two basic activities.

Interpretation

One of those is interpretation. To interpret the Bible means to determine the plain meaning of its texts, that is, its verses and passages. That plain meaning is what the writers intended to say in writing them.

Consider 1 Corinthians 8:13, which I mentioned last week, as an example of what I mean, **“Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble.”** That text means that we should not do something if it diminishes or ruins the spirituality and faith of new Christians.

That illustrates one activity that eating the Bible involves – interpretation. We determine the plain meaning of its texts.

Unfortunately, Christians sometimes misinterpret them. Remember the Christian I mentioned last week. He quit playing cards for fun with his family because it offended several Christians he knew. He took **“cause my brother to stumble”** in 1 Corinthians 8:13 to mean offend long established Christians. You can see that he misinterpreted the text.

For the Bible to transform us, we must first of all correctly interpret it. And to correctly interpret it, we must first of all know and apply the principles for doing so. There are such principles you know.

One principle, for instance, is, interpret a verse or passage contextually. There are various contexts, one of which is historical context. Sometimes, there are historical facts that explain the plain meaning of a text, like 1 Corinthians 8:13. In the first century, many new converts from paganism still believed that the gods they formerly served were real, even though they no longer served them. But observing other Christians eat foods that had been dedicated to those gods influenced some of them to begin serving them again. That historical fact is essential to correctly interpreting the stumbling block principle. To **“cause to stumble”** does not mean to offend long-established Christians. It does mean to diminish or ruin the spirituality and faith of new Christians. So, just because what we do offends legalistic Christians doesn't necessarily mean we have to stop doing it.

There are many other principles for interpreting the Bible and we need to learn and apply them, for two reasons. First, all of us interpret the Bible. And second, all of us follow certain principles for doing so.

Let me take a little survey by asking you two sets of questions. First, how many of you believe that adultery is the only moral ground for divorce – that it's a sin to divorce a spouse for any other reason? How many of you believe that it isn't the only moral ground for divorce? Second, how many of you believe that adultery is always a moral ground for divorce – that it's always right to divorce an adulterous spouse? How many of you believe that it is sometimes not a moral ground for divorce?

There are seven texts in the Bible that address divorce. You believe what you believe about it because you interpreted those texts, that is, determined what they mean. And you determined what they mean by following certain principles of interpretation. My point is that all of us interpret the Bible and follow certain principles for doing so – whether we realize it or not. That implies several things, one of which is this. The issue isn't, "**Are we following principles for interpreting the Bible**" because we are. The issue is, "**Are the principles we're following the right ones?**" If they are, we will likely interpret the text before us correctly. If they are not, we will likely misinterpret it.

The moral of the story is clear. Learn and apply the right principles for interpreting the Bible.

I would quickly note that many Christians oppose that point of view. Paragraph 112 of our denomination's Discipline states this: "**The Holy Spirit, who inspired the Scripture, must ever be its true interpreter.**" That's true, and many Christians conclude this from it. It somehow impugns the Holy Spirit and His work to learn and apply principles for interpreting the Bible.

But they're wrong. Interpreting the Bible is the Holy Spirit's work, but as is usually the case in our lives with God, we also have a part to play in it. We must give Him something to work with and that something is learning and applying the right principles for interpreting the Bible, as

best as we can. Most texts can be interpreted using concentration and good sense. But many, as our different answers to those divorce questions show, require more and so we give that more to them.

I've written a 117 page study titled *Biblesmiths* that teaches the right principles for interpreting the Bible and how to apply them. If you'd like copy, let the office or me know and we'll get you one.

Spiritual Reading

Eating the Bible, internalizing it, involves a second activity – spiritual reading, also called *lectio divina*. *Lectio divina* is an ancient practice. Friends of Jesus have done it and been transformed by it for centuries.

Henri Nouwen had a picture hanging in his home. It showed a woman with an open Bible on her lap, but gazing upward to God. The message it conveyed was that she was looking for Him through it. That, Nouwen said, is *lectio divina* and he was right. What we're trying to do is see through the text, even beyond it, to its author and subject, God. Our purpose is to encounter Him through it.

I can't impress upon you enough how beneficial this practice of the Bible is. I talk all the time about the central activities for engaging God. This is one of the most essential of those. It enables us to engage Him profoundly, and conversely, for Him to engage us.

Spiritual reading, *lectio divina*, is comprised of five basic elements, which Richard Foster identifies in his book *Life with God*. Let me quickly explain and illustrate each of those.

The first element is preparing. We don't practice spiritual reading cold turkey. We warm up for it by doing four things. #1 - Choose a text from the Bible that's long enough to stretch our thoughts but short enough to cover in the amount of time we have. We can select it from a lectionary, a sermon or Sunday school lesson we've heard, a devotional book, a Bible story or character we enjoy, and more. #2 – Go to a quiet place where we can read free from all distractions, especially the

telephone. #3 – Still ourselves by **“quieting the clamor of demands and distractions,”** as Foster says it. We silence our souls. And #4 – Pray and ask God to empower us to meet with Him.

I once spent a year studying and interpreting the Psalms. When I came to Psalm 131 one night, I was so touched by it that I decided to read it spiritually. So, I went to a quiet place in my house, stilled myself, and asked God to empower me to meet with Him. I prepared.

The second element in spiritual reading is listening. We read the text all the way through without pausing, taking in what we read. We do so with a sense of expectancy, as the woman in Nouwen’s picture did. After the initial reading, we read the text again, slowly. We take the time to highlight, underline, or write down any word, phrase, clause, or idea that seems to come off the page to us. We don’t second-guess ourselves here, wondering if it’s God or us making them do so. We just trust Him to speak and work as He wills.

Having already read and interpreted Psalm 131, I read it through again, slowly, writing down two words and two clauses that came off the page to me. The words were **“proud”** and **“haughty.”** The clauses were **“composed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child,”** and **“My soul is like a weaned child within me.”** I believed that God gave those words and clauses to me. I listened.

There’s a third element in spiritual reading – reflecting. We reflect on the words, phrases, clauses, and ideas we highlighted, underlined, or wrote down. We ruminate on them, mull them over. We’re alert to something as we do – any connections that God may make between them and the particulars of our own persons and lives. We may even whisper a simple prayer asking Him, **“What do you want me to see here?”**

Going back to Psalm 131, I asked God, **“What do the words and clauses I wrote down have to do with me?”** So, he told me. I’ve made progress in humility. But I’m still proud, fretting too much for what I want, like a nursing child fretting for its mother’s breast. But He also assured me. If I continued to faithfully engage Him, He would

eventually free me from the nagging of self-seeking, as the weaned child is free from the nagging of feeding at its mother's breast. I reflected.

Talking with God is the fourth element in spiritual reading. We speak to Him about what He revealed to us through the text. What He revealed determines the content or subject matter of what we talk to Him about. We confess, repent, express thanks, rejoice, express relief and so on as His revelation prompts us to.

That's what I did. I confessed to God that I was egocentric and repented for being so, I then thanked Him for the assurance He gave me that the rest of the weaned child would be mine. I rejoiced with Him in that. I talked with God.

Finally, the fifth element in spiritual reading is obeying, also called application. God has revealed things to us through the text. We then make and carry out the decision to live those things out in the activities, experiences, events, and relationships of our everyday lives.

Shortly after I read Psalm 131 spiritually, a person not from our church stopped by my office unannounced to talk. I felt stirrings of resentment that he did because I was busy and didn't have time to **"shoot the breeze"** as we say it. So, I focused on Psalm 131 and pictured the weaned baby resting peacefully at its mother's breast. I also recalled a note I wrote beside verse 1, **"Pride undervalues people."** Doing that dissolved the stirrings of resentment and I was soon at rest. I obeyed or applied what God revealed to me through Psalm 131.

Conclusion

That then is how we eat or internalize the Bible. We interpret it correctly and read it spiritually. Both are vital activities that enable the Holy Spirit to do His transforming work in us. The implication is clear. I show you the Milky Way and Bible again and leave you with this challenge. May you and I do with the Bible what I'm going to do with this Milky Way in about 15 minutes – eat it!