

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"True Strength"
Dr. J. Dent

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Bible Sunday

You don't really notice your strengths or your weaknesses until something unusual happens. Maybe it's the fact you can't carry as many groceries at one time as you used to be able to do. Maybe it's working in the garden, and not being able to clear a rock or an obstacle. Maybe it's work that you might have taken for granted at one time, even blow drying your hair, but then something happens to your shoulder. There are lots of smaller indications that we have weaknesses that we didn't notice, long before any hernias, strokes or heart attacks occur, which really take us by surprise, no matter what.

We don't really know our strengths until they are tested as well. The Chilean miners were the subject of the world media and many personal conversations two weeks ago. I don't know about you, but I certainly have as one of my nightmare scenarios being trapped in a small dark place hundreds of yards from open air and ground without light, without basic provisions. All of the miners rescued after 69 days, 600 meters underground is quite something. It is something to thank the Lord for taking place, it is something they themselves considered a matter for thanking God.

Just as the miners were trapped, and desperately needed help to get out of their situation, so do we. We are spiritually trapped and need the Lord and God's community to help us out of where we are. I can't tell you how you are trapped or what the dark mine in your soul happens to be. I just know that all of us have sin, both what we do, and what has been done against us, in our lives. The Scriptures teach us that there is a first step to dealing with the blockages, brokenness and rebellion against God and good in our lives.

Jesus teaches that first step in the Gospel reading today. He does what some storytellers would call "cameos." Now the literal meaning of cameo is "a technique of engraving in relief on a gem or other stone, especially with layers of different hues, cut so the raised design is of one colour and the background is of another." I remember seeing necklaces, whether my mother's or grandmother's or someone else's, I'm not sure, but there was a small face etched in stone on a pendant. That's a cameo. In literature and in

drama and in story telling, it's taking a scene and focusing in on one or two characters.

Jesus focuses in on two people going to synagogue or church on the day of worship. They are both praying. So this is a family story. These are two people who love God enough or want God in their lives enough to go to a worship service.

But there is a whole different tone in the way they approach God. Dr. Luke gives the editorial about Jesus' teaching about the two different ways these men come to God in the following manner. He says that if your tendency is to think about how good you are and how bad everyone else is, then take a look at these two guys.

The first tends to show off the merit badges he has won in his scouting career. He has helped little old ladies across the street. He always uses clean language. He hasn't cheated on his wife. He doesn't pocket money or property from work. He gives faithfully to the church, even ten percent of his total income. He teaches Bible studies and doesn't cheat on his taxes. He knows he is so much better than the guy sitting over in the corner who rides a Harley to worship, wears a leather jacket and probably is involved in shady business dealings.

Meanwhile, the guy in the leather jacket in the back feels like he is not even worthy to come into the building, let alone trumpet his merit badges to God. He knows his addictions and rebellion against God. He knows how far off he can stray from the same faith that the scout with all the merit badges and he profess.

He asks for mercy as he acknowledges his weakness. Here is the tax collector's real strength. His strength is that he can acknowledge his weakness before God (and others), Jesus says.

That is one of the central messages of the Bible. If you think you know how good you are and how bad everybody else is, then look out. God needs to teach you and he needs to teach me. Because I can sometimes think about how good I think I am. But it doesn't last for long. Then I ask the Lord for mercy. How about you?

Jesus points us continually back to the Scriptures. We live in a time of great change. In a short few decades, we have gone from a culture in Canada that acknowledged the goodness and beauty of the Holy Bible to one where we are mocked if we take that book seriously. The fact is that no matter how well educated we are, we have much to learn from God, and much to learn from the Scriptures.

We shouldn't be afraid to say how much we have to learn, no matter what time of life we are in. We are to be learning all the time, because the only other option is stagnation or loss of what we have already learned.

So we have many tools to learn from God, but the one which has been on the best seller list for over 100,000 weeks is the Bible. And I don't know about you but I need help to keep learning about my faith from the Bible. I need constant refreshing of my memory and constant study to help me learn something new every week, even every day. That is why we consistently urge you to read the Scriptures, whether you have a book that suggests a passage, or whether you have a Bible that breaks up the book into 365 readings, or whether you have some other method. It is good to simply read it. And if you don't have a Bible in modern language, or in your language, we can make sure you get one.

I know there are parts that are difficult to understand. This shouldn't take us by surprise since the book is at least 2000 years old. The cultures in the book are not the same as ours. Some of the teaching is difficult to apply and interpret. But nevertheless, the Bible is the revelation of God, that is, the uncovering of what is hidden about our faith.

So I urge you to start reading and if you don't know where to start, start in one of the Gospels, and then read something of Paul. Join a Bible Study here on Wednesday, Friday or Sunday, or go to one of the Christian book stores and pick up a study booklet. You can even join one in a different church, if you can't find one here that matches your schedule, or perhaps we can talk about starting one that meets your need.

The only way we will have enough drive to choose to become involved in the Bible, is by realizing that we still need to learn, and God still has a lot to teach us. If we do not feel that way, then of course it will be difficult to find any time for such a pursuit.

But if we do convince ourselves that the Scriptures are the way to know God, then we can receive what we read last week about the Bible. Listen to 2 Timothy 3:16-17 from the Message.

There's nothing like the written Word of God for showing you the way to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us.

Remember that salvation is not just about a one time decision for Christ, although it is that, it is more than that, more than a baptism, more than a confirmation, more than a public confession of Christ. Salvation includes the reality of God changing us to be more like God and like Jesus. Salvation includes sanctification, setting us apart to God. So it is not just a one time event, but rather all the ways that we continue to need God until this life is over and we shall see God face to face.

October month is always full of Thanksgiving and also marks the occasion of the Reformation. The Reformation reminds us that the church is constantly reforming, not changing what it believes but rather living out what we are to believe, and helping each other to live the way God wants us to live. This always begins with honesty, and the willingness to admit weakness. Thus we confess our sins to one another and to God and we are healed.

This month, decide to start reading the Bible, whatever version, on my phone, there are 18 English versions, two German, one Dutch, one Korean, a couple French, several Chinese and probably whatever language is close to your heart. If your phone can help you read the Scriptures regularly, let it do so. This application was free, by the way. Of course, that's just my phone. There's a lot more out there and one to help you get into the Bible even if you have never succeeded in doing so before.

Whatever it takes to be encouraged to keep on reading, learning and trusting God anew, please do so.

Let us pray.