

## John 5:31-47

### Searching the Scriptures the Right Way

*Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me – v. 39*

We've seen in our study of this chapter that the miracle Jesus performed on the paralytic turned into a heated controversy with the Jews. They were more incensed by the fact that he'd healed a man on the Sabbath day than they were thrilled that a man who was paralyzed for 38 years could now take up his bed and walk. We noted that the more they contended with Jesus the stronger Jesus became in His affirmations of His deity.

*My Father worketh hitherto, and I work* He said in v. 17. *Therefore the Jews sought the more to kill him,* we go on to read in v. 18 *because he not only had broken the sabbath, but said also that God was his Father, making himself equal with God.* And in the verses that follow we noted how Jesus and His Father were one in purpose and one in the work of redemption.

As you follow this contentious debate into vv. 31ff there are a number of commentators that point out how Jesus is speaking as if the setting were in a court room. You need to keep that in mind when you read in v. 31 *If I bear witness of myself, my witness is not true.* I like the way RC Sproul illustrates the meaning of this statement. He shares how he had done business with his bank and that business required his signature on the bottom of a contract as well as the signature of a witness. He points out that it wouldn't be acceptable for him to have signed one line which called for his signature and then sign again with his signature the line that called for a witness that the signature was his.

This was what Christ meant when He said *If I bear witness of myself, my witness is not true* – i.e. His witness would not be authenticated simply on His own say so. And so He calls for corroborating witnesses. And he lists 4 of them. The first corroborating witness is John the Baptist - *Ye sent unto John, and he bare witness unto the truth* Christ says in v. 33. And then He calls for an even more powerful corroborating witness which was found in the works He performed. *But I have greater witness than that of John: for the works which the Father hath given me to finish, the same works that I do, bear witness of me, that the Father hath sent me* – v. 36.

And then there's the witness of the Father Himself – verse 37: *And the Father himself, which hath sent me, hath borne witness of me. Ye have neither heard his voice at any time, nor seen his shape.* When Christ says *Ye have neither heard his voice at any time* He's obviously not including that instance when Christ was baptized. On that occasion there was the audible voice from heaven. So we read in Mt. 3:16f *And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.*

Before that occasion the audible voice of God had never been heard all the way back to the giving of the 10 commandments. Now following Christ's baptism that voice which had never been heard was heard. And the voice of God the Father gave a powerful and authoritative witness to the glorious truth that Christ was the Son of God.

So these are 3 of the 4 witnesses – John the Baptist; the miracles Christ performed; His Father in heaven – and then what could be taken as the most important witness of all which was and is the witness of Scripture. *Search the scriptures* Christ says in v. 39 *for in them ye think ye have eternal life; and they are they which testify of me.*

I say that this last witness is perhaps the most important of them all because it's in the Scriptures that we read of John the Baptist's witness to Christ. And it's in the Scriptures that we read the accounts of Christ's miracles; And it's in the Scriptures that we have the account of the Father's voice being heard from heaven even though His voice had not been heard over the course of many generations. And it's in the Scriptures that we learn how important the witness of Scripture is to His identity as the Christ.

Now we miss something in our Authorized Versions that most other English translations pick up in their rendering of the verse. It appears to us, based on the KJV translation that Christ is commanding the Jews to search the Scriptures. You would expect this word in its original form in the Greek to be expressed in the Imperative mode. The imperative mode is the command mode. But in fact the word appears in the indicative mode. In other words Christ is speaking in a matter of fact way when He says in effect *You are constantly searching the Scriptures.*

He's not commanding them so much as He's simply stating a fact. *You Jews are constantly searching the Scriptures.* But then there comes this tragic irony – they were searching the Scriptures but they were missing Christ. And because they were missing Christ they were missing life. Isn't that tragically ironic? Of all the advantages the Jews possessed over other people that one advantage that the Apostle Paul identifies as their chief advantage was their having the Scriptures. Listen to the words of Rom. 3:1,2: *What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there of circumcision? 2 Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God.*

And yet in spite of that advantage and in spite of their diligence in trying to utilize that advantage by constantly being engaged in the practice of searching the Scriptures, they still missed the mark. And they missed it in one of the most important topics that are covered in the Scriptures. They missed the mark in the matter of life.

Now you and I are suppose to be searching the Scriptures also. I've always loved that verse in Acts 17:11 that speaks of the Berean Christians: *These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.* A Christian is to be a student of the Word. It doesn't matter how seasoned a saint you are or how young you may be in the Lord, the Bible is a book that you're suppose to search.

But when we read of the Jews in Christ's time who did search the Scriptures and missed Christ and missed life, then we're forced to acknowledge that there must be a right way and a wrong way to search the Scriptures. I want to focus on that right way this morning. Simply put:

## You Must Search the Scriptures in the Right Way

So that's what I want to consider this morning and in order that we may search the Scriptures in the right way:

### I. We Must Search the Scriptures with the Right Premise

The premise, of course, is Christ. *They are they which testify of me*, Christ says in our text. The most obvious cross reference to our text would be the words you find in Luke 24 when Christ came alongside those two Emmaus Road disciples. So in v. 27 we read *And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself*.

You'll notice that reference is made here to *all the scriptures*. The force of this statement is made even more so when you come to Lk. 24:44 *And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me*.

In the first verse I cited, v. 27 two divisions in Scriptures are cited by Christ – *Moses, and all the prophets*. In v. 44 the third of three major division of Scriptures recognized by the Jews is cited. Not only is reference made to Moses and the prophets but also the Psalms. Albert Barnes breaks down these divisions for us in his commentary on the N.T.:

The five books of Moses — Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. Among the Jews this was the first division of the Old Testament, and was called the law.

The prophets. This was the second and largest part of the Hebrew Scriptures. It comprehended the books of Joshua, Judges, 1st and 2nd Samuel, 1st and 2nd Kings, which were called the former prophets; and Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve smaller books from Daniel to Malachi, which were called the latter prophets.

The psalms: The word here used probably means what were comprehended under the name of Hagiographa, or holy writings. This consisted of the Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, and the two books of Chronicles. This division of the Old Testament was in use long before the time of Christ, and was what he referred to here; and he meant to say that in each of these divisions of the Old Testament there were prophecies respecting himself.

So the Scriptures in their entirety or the Scriptures in each major division testified of Christ. This book is the book of Christ. You could say that the title to the book of Revelation could be viewed as an appropriate title for the entire Bible when you read the

opening words *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*. And unless you know that Christ is the theme of the book it becomes very easy to misread the Bible. This was sadly the case with the Jews. And we can't help but note the irony of a people so devoted to the study of the Scriptures, so meticulous and careful when it came to copying the Scriptures, and yet for all their care and zeal they missed the main point of the book which is Christ Himself.

I remember when I was in high school and it was the beginning of a new school year. I was in an English literature course and the teacher was giving us the plan of the class for that semester. We were required to read so many books and we would be giving book reports on those books, some written, some oral (those were always scary). And the teacher then gave us a very unusual option when he said that if anyone would like to give a book report on the Bible, that would be acceptable. (It makes me wonder if perhaps that teacher was a Christian trying to encourage us to read the Bible).

I wonder this morning – if you were to give a book report on the Bible, what would you say the Bible was about? Any number of things might be put forward as possibilities of what the Bible was about. Some might suggest it's a book that shows you how to live. The 10 commandments might come to the foreground as a summary capsule of what the Bible is about. Others might suggest that it's a book of fables after the order of Aesop's fables. In other words the Bible is a book of fictitious stories with a moral behind each story. Stories like Adam and Eve and Noah and Jonah in the whale are designed to teach us certain lessons that pertain to life. And even the story of Christ is meant to inspire us about how to live.

And the list could go on and on, I suppose. What Christ makes very plain in his dispute with the Pharisees is that this book is about Him. And when you realize that the Bible is all about Christ you're able to see a unity to this book that you might not see otherwise. How many Christians, I'm afraid, become puzzled about the fact that this book is made up of 66 books, each one an entity in itself. The settings are varied and the authors are from different types of backgrounds and locations and time periods in history. The types of literature are varied from historical narrative to poetry to pithy and concise proverbs to highly symbolic prophecies. But once you know the major theme of the book then it becomes a whole lot easier to follow the story line, as it were.

From the dawn of Creation you read of the fall of man, and of the promise of God that a Messiah would come from the seed of the woman. From the calling of Abraham to leave his homeland and venture forth to Canaan you see the Lord at work forming a people through whom the Messiah would eventually come. The book takes the form of a suspenseful drama when you follow the course of the nation of Israel and as Israel seems so bent on sin and idolatry you're made to wonder if God can accomplish His purpose of bringing forth His Son to accomplish redemption.

And when at last the Northern tribes followed by the Southern kingdom are taken into captivity you might be tempted to think that redemption has failed and that Christ will not come forth. The people were just too sinful for God's purpose to be realized. But then you

learn of a small remnant preserved among those that went into captivity and how they would eventually return to the land and rebuild the temple and the city of Jerusalem and then at last the Messiah would come. Oh child of God, don't miss the major theme and unifying factor to the entire Bible. This is a book about Christ. Hear Christ's word this morning as He says *Search the Scriptures*. That needs to be our constant exercise of devotion. It applies to each and every person that names the name of Christ.

You are expected, no matter what else you do, no matter what your vocation in life happens to be, you are nevertheless to search the Scriptures and when you search the Scriptures be sure to keep in mind the words of Christ *they are they which testify of me*. Don't miss the main theme in Scripture because to miss that main theme ultimately means to miss life itself. And this leads to my next point. We've seen how the Scriptures must be searched with the right premise, that premise being Christ. Consider next that if we would search the Scriptures in the right way:

## II. We Must Search with the Right Aim

Again the words of our text: *Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me.*

This is a book of life. This a book that show you how to live and how to gain eternal life. We've noted, I'm sure, on numerous occasions that that the purpose statement in John's gospel has to do with life. Jn. 20:31 *But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.*

Oh the purpose of John's gospel is to persuade you to believe in Christ. John wants you to know that Christ is the Son of God. The very opening words of this gospel provide you with the thesis, as it were, as to what John wants you to know and believe about Jesus Christ. Jn. 1:1-4: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 The same was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. 4 In him was life; and the life was the light of men.*

Your view of Christ must be that high. You must see that He is God. You must see that He is the Creator of the world along with His Father. And you must see that He is the source of life. *In him was life*. This is why to miss Christ is to miss life. And yet would you note how the Jews did understand that the Scriptures pertain to life. This much they got right – they saw the Scriptures as pertaining to life. The reason they searched the Scriptures was because in them they thought they had eternal life.

That says quite a lot about the Jews when you think about it. There are those who think that the relationship God had with the Jews only pertained to the temporal life we live in this world for a brief time before we die. He pledged to be their God only insofar as God would give them the promised land and they would occupy that land. And yet when you see what the author of Hebrews has to say about Abraham it becomes very clear that Abraham saw way beyond the land of Palestine.

Heb. 11:9 *By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, Isn't that telling? The promised land was a strange country to him. Couldn't you say of Abraham the same thing you'd say about any N.T. saint that this world is not his home, he's just a passing through. And so we go on to read: By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: 10 For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.*

Oh he saw way beyond this present world in all its infirmities and sins. And in a summary statement that pertains to all the faithful listed in Heb. 11 the author goes on to say: *These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. 14 For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. 15 And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. 16 But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly.*

So searching for eternal life became the heritage of the Jews right up to the time of Christ. They understood rightly that the Word of God has to do with life. And yet they missed life. Just like they missed righteousness they missed life. Paul explains to the Romans how they missed righteousness. Rom. 10:3: *For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God.*

We studied this verse not that long ago and you may recall that I pointed out that 3 different kinds of righteousness are given to us in this verse. There's God's essential righteousness. They were ignorant of that righteousness which amounts to God's essential righteousness. Only those that are ignorant of God's essential righteousness will ever harbor the notion that they're righteous enough to gain heaven. And then there's self-righteousness. *They being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness.* Self-righteousness is the very thing that must be disowned by anyone who would gain eternal life.

Listen to how Paul disowns self-righteousness in the words of Phil. 3:7-9: *But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.*

The righteousness which is of God by faith is the 3<sup>rd</sup> kind of righteousness that's found in our text in Rom. 10:3. *For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God.* They failed to submit to Gospel-righteousness in other words, because they were

ignorant of God's righteousness and mistakenly thought they could establish their own righteousness.

Now they were right about something – It takes righteousness to gain life. It takes righteousness to gain eternal life. *For I say unto you, Christ says in Mt. 5:20 That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.*

How tragic, then, to have the book of life and to miss life. How tragic to miss the very person that is the source of life, the One who has the power and authority to give eternal life to as many as will receive Him. The primary factor that contributes to missing life is human pride. It was in their pride that the Jews thought they could establish their own righteousness. And it's the pride of man that keeps him from following Paul's example of disavowing all self righteousness.

When it comes to disavowing self-righteousness there's a sense in which you have to die in order to live. Listen to Christ's words Jn. 12:24. They speak with reference to Christ Himself but they can also be applied to the experience of a sinner becoming a Christian: *Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.*

We die to self to disavowing our self-righteousness. We become, to use the phrase of the first beatitude, *poor in spirit*. We feel ourselves to be as helpless as those hearers of Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost who cried out: *men and brethren what shall we do?* They cried out that way because their sins were revealed and they were under conviction of sin. They were charged with a very serious crime – the crime of crucifying the Messiah.

For those who try to establish their own righteousness, crucifying the Messiah becomes foolishness and a stumbling block. And yet Peter explained that it was all in accordance with a Divine plan. It was after the *determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God*. And what's more (and this brings us to the point of our study in John 5 this morning) it was foretold in the Scriptures.

*O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken* Christ says to the Emmaus road disciples: *Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory? And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.* (Lk. 24:25-28).

The Scriptures foretold His sufferings. The Old Testament system of worship with all those animal sacrifices symbolized His sufferings and substitutionary death. Every part of Old Testament worship right down to the tabernacle and the furniture in that tabernacle pointed to Christ. This is one of the reasons, you know, that there had to be such a strict application of the regulative principle in Old Testament times. The regulative principle tells us that we don't invent the way we worship God, we follow the pattern that God Himself reveals. To vary from that pattern would be to mar the picture of Christ.

And so I trust this morning that it can be said of you what was matter of factly said of the Jews. They were in the habit of searching the Scriptures. That's a good habit to cultivate and maintain. But do it carefully for there have been many that have engaged in that practice but have done so from a wrong perspective. Make sure that in searching the Scriptures you're searching for Christ. Make sure you keep the words of Christ ever at the forefront of your mind - *they are they which testify of me.*

If you keep that perspective in view and you're honest before God about what the Scriptures reveal of you and your sin, then you'll know to go to Christ. And in believing in Christ, you'll gain the wonderful and durable blessing of everlasting life.