

SERMON AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

SUNDAY, JULY 14TH, 2024

MATTHEW 5: 14-19

“READ THE HOLY BIBLE”

In our day, poets are not well known.....if we did a survey where we each were supposed to name our favorite contemporary poet, most survey sheets would be blank! But it was different in the 1800's---poets were celebrities. And there were many great poets at that time in England, America, Russia, Germany, etc.

In England in the 1800s, two great poets, Elizabeth Barret and Robert Browning, fell in love and decided to marry. Elizabeth Barret's parents did not like Browning and were dead set against the wedding. They told their daughter they would not attend the wedding and would totally cut off their relationship with her if she did marry Browning. She married him. And they carried out their threat. They refused to see her again. She was heartbroken and began to write them long and loving letters each week, asking that they be reconciled. No letters were written back but she kept writing her parents, one every week. After ten years of this she received a large box in the mail from her parents. In the box were 520 letters, all the letters Elizabeth had mailed---one per week for 10 years. Not even one had been opened! (Introducing the Orthodox Church, Father Anthony Coniaris, Light & Life Publishing, p. 152)

The Bible is a collection of God's love letters to our human race. Not a big box, but a big book---a volume of many letters to us from our loving Heavenly Father. Have you read His letters to you? Or perhaps you have been more like Elizabeth Barret's parents..... A Bible that is not being read is of no use.

As Orthodox Christians we show great reverence for the Bible. We have part of it (the gospels) on our holy altars. We process with the Bible, we kiss it, we cense it, we speak highly of it. But do we read it? Some do, some don't!

In today's assigned gospel lesson, Jesus said in Matthew 5: 17—"Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill." It is the Old Testament the Lord is here specifically referring to. It and the New Testament make up our Bible---the Lord in this verse shows how important the Bible is. But how much do we read it? Or is it an unusual day when we open the cover?

As Orthodox, we should read our Bibles more than anyone else. After all, it's *our* book. It was written, in the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, by our Saints---the Prophets and Apostles from Moses to Paul. The selection of what books are in the Bible was made by our Orthodox Church Fathers in the first few hundred year of our Church's history. And it is our Orthodox Tradition that properly interprets the Bible. Other people are very welcome to use it---no rental fees.

But it actually is ours. How much are we reading it?

Some of you read it a lot! And it's very central in your lives! Others....not so much.... Some maybe not at all! For some, it's like that box of letters Elizabeth Barret's parents sent back to her—unopened and unread.

So the message of today's sermon is a simple one---read your Bible! Doing so can be used by God to transform you into a better Christian. Father Roman Braga, a very holy man who spent the last part of his life in America, was thrown into a very rough prison along with many other believers when the Communists took over Romania at the end of World War II. The Communists wished to crush the Church and many believers suffered greatly. Bibles were banned but someone snuck one in. One Bible---for all the many believers in the miserable place. The prisoners came up with a way to make the one copy accessible to all. The pages were torn out carefully. The pages for each book of the Bible were assigned to one prisoner per book---he would work hard to quickly memorize that book. (I am poor at memorization---I would have tried to be sure I got Jude instead of Isaiah!). Then when a person wanted to "read" a part of a particular book he would go to the person who memorized that book and that man would recite the passage for him. A clever idea. Father Roman was assigned the gospel of St. John. He worked hard, totally absorbing that wonderful book until he had it memorized and could recite for others. And by so totally dedicating himself to that book, he was changed and became holier, a very saintly man. He didn't just memorize the book; that gospel transformed him. (Isaac Schaeffer, "The Bible Fills Us With Joy", in *The Word*, Vol. 57, no. 2, Feb., 2013)

The Bible, because God works through it, can transform us, too. Read it, love it, obey it---and bit by bit you can also become holier.

Action is what is needed. So here is a list of 7 steps to take regarding the Bible.

#1---Read a little of the Bible every day. If you can do more, that's great, but even starting with just 5 minutes a day is great. If you are so terribly busy that you don't think you can squeeze 5 more minutes into your schedule, there is a way to do it. Just get up 5 minutes earlier. 5 minutes less sleep won't hurt you. Reading the Bible *will* help you. Start with just one chapter a day---and you can always soon gradually do more. If it's a real long chapter, just read half. It is a great habit to have!

#2---Don't get uptight about which translation to use. The Orthodox Study Bible is great but there are plenty of translations that will work just fine. Feel free to ask me about them if you have questions. Plenty of Bibles here, of course. Just ask and you will have one!

#3---You may not wish to begin at the beginning although that's fine to do if you wish. The Old Testament comes first and it's harder, over all, to understand than is the New Testament. It's also much, much bigger with many more books. Easier to get bogged down in. So, generally speaking, it's best to start with the New Testament (although if you are in a rapid read through

the Bible program that starts with the Old Testament, that's fine---because you will be going through it quickly and will get to the New before long!). Best of all, pick one of the 4 gospels to start with.

4. Pray before you read. Just a simple prayer is fine----a prayer asking God to help you understand and obey what you read. St. Isaac of Syria, a Church Father from about 1500 years ago, wrote this---“Consider prayer to be the key to the understanding of truth in the Bible.”

5. Get help. Most likely, help will be helpful! Some of the Bible is pretty easy to understand. Lots of it is hard to understand. We have 3 Bible studies currently in our parish that can help a lot! Also, we have Psalter reading programs in Lent and Advent. We recently had a “through the Bible in a year” program. And there are lots of good Orthodox books to help you along. If you get an Orthodox Study Bible, that can be a big help----it has notes and articles in it to assist you in understanding what you are reading. And feel very free to ask me questions----in person, email, etc. That is something I enjoy!

6. Believe it. It is God's word, it is all true. St. Irenaeus, back around 200 A.D., wrote-----“The inspiration of the Holy Spirit kept the writers from mistakes or falsehoods.” (in Early History of Christian Doctrine, J. Bethune-Baker, p. 47) The truth we should believe is not always easy to know on the surface. There are passages that are symbolic, allegorical, poetic, etc. So step 6 ties in with step 5 above. We all need help to understand the Bible. The Church Fathers are our main guides here. But that means we have to get access to what the Fathers say about different passages. So go back to step 5 to see about getting help with understanding the Bible and what our Fathers teach about it. And once you know what it really says---believe it!

7. Obey it! Some things seem unclear? Don't worry. Plenty of it is clear, so focus on obeying what you can understand! Some commands from God are simple. “Thou shalt not steal.” That's clear as a bell. “Love your enemies”—nothing too mysterious there! If you can't understand a passage so as to know how to obey it, don't panic. Go back to Step 5 and get help. But there's a lot we will easily understand----we should go ahead and obey!

Follow these 7 steps and the power of God's written word, the Bible, will start to work in your life. God will use the Bible to draw you closer to Him and to change us.

And sometimes it happens fast! In Russia, after the Communists took over, they went after all religion, but especially against our Orthodox Church. In addition to imprisoning and killing many believers, they held what they called “Anti-God Campaigns”. Propaganda workers would have public meetings where they would attack Christianity and try to convince everyone to become atheist. One big strategy was to mock religion as a way of shaking people's faith.

Actor Alexander Rostovzev had become an atheist and an enthusiastic participant in satirical anti-God skits. One of them was entitled “Christ In A Tuxedo”. He played the part of Christ

dressed in a tuxedo and top hat. He would tap dance around the stage, reciting and singing blasphemous lyrics full of humor and hatred. At the climax of the play, he would stop dancing and pick up a Bible. He would very solemnly read Jesus' Beatitudes. When he finished he would violently throw the Bible on the floor and then sing obscenities about Jesus while trampling on the book. One night there was a big surprise. He had been baptized as a baby in the Orthodox Church. God's grace apparently had not totally left him! As he read the Beatitudes, God worked in his heart. And before he got done reading them, he had returned to belief in Christ. So he held the Bible up and then prayed out loud---"Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy Kingdom!" Then he crossed himself and knelt down to pray silently to God. At first, the crowd laughed, thinking it was a satirical addition to the skit. After a bit, they realized he was *really* praying---and the atheists in the crowd became very angry. They began to yell and boo---and to throw things at him. The curtain was quickly pulled shut and Rostovzev was arrested----and never heard from again. He read the Bible that night on the stage for 2 or 3 minutes. And it totally changed him—from an atheist blasphemer to a believer again. A believer ready to take on the whole Communist regime to show his new loyalty to Jesus Christ.

The Bible is a powerful book! Read it. Live by it. Obey it. And let God's power work in your life!