

You Pick The Sermon: Why Does The Church Have Its Own Vocabulary?

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Isaiah 6:1-10; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Mark 12:28-34

Friends, our final Scripture reading tonight comes from Mark 12:28-34. May God add His blessing to the reading of His Word. "One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." "Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions."

As a public speaker, there's nothing worse than seeing a sea of blank stares. Sometimes it's because everyone's tired or it's too hot or too cold. But two things are terrifying for a pastor during a sermon: when you realize either that nobody cares about what you're talking about, or nobody understands what you're talking about. And when both happen, it's a knockdown punch.

Sometimes our weekly lesson fascinates half of us and bores the other half; not much we can do there. But *understanding* is something different. Sometimes we come across unusual words in Scripture or in a sermon and they'll throw us off. We'll hit a term like *justification* or *sanctification* or *salvation* and we stop listening because we're not quite sure what it means.

That leads us to tonight's You Pick The Sermon question: *why does the church have its own vocabulary?* There are really two parts to that question – why is there unique vocabulary in the Bible, and why does it matter? Tonight, it's my hope that we'll get to the bottom of it and come out both challenged and refreshed by what we learn.

How many of you know what a 5150 is? How about an aperture setting? Or a CSR? I bet Curt could tell us the first, Ed Rapin the second, and Gay the third. The first term comes from police code, the second is used in photography, and the third in legal reporting. Now you might have come across those terms if you were reading a book about those fields, a detective novel or a photography manual. But we don't run across those words every day.

Here's the reason: *every field of knowledge has its own vocabulary.* No matter what we do, what books or movies we like, what sports we watch or play, each has its own terminology that you learn as you participate in it. It may be as complex as nuclear physics or as simple as needlework, but to talk about it in a meaningful way, you have to "know the lingo." The more we know about a subject, the more we know the ins and outs of its vocabulary.

Shared terminology can mean different things to different people. Talk football with a European and he'll mention goals and scissor kicks and spot kicks. Talk football with an American and you'll hear about touchdowns and hail-mary passes and quarterback sacks. Both know tackles, punts, and penalties, but what's meant by those terms is very different between soccer and American football. You've got to know which one you're talking about.

And we expect new words when we encounter new concepts. Have you ever heard of the word "technobabble"? It was coined by an actor on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Technobabble were terms the writers created to explain technology that doesn't exist. Technobabble frustrated new viewers who couldn't figure out what a tricorder or warp nacelle were, but those terms made the Star Trek universe believable. We expect that in the future, new discoveries would come with new names to describe them.

That's why we shouldn't be surprised that the Bible has a unique vocabulary. It was written over the course of 1500 years by many different authors, some writing down the very words of God, in three different languages – Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. They created words; they borrowed words from other cultures, and they introduced concepts that were completely new. They needed new words to explain what God was doing, and as they defined those words, they became the vocabulary of Judaism and, eventually, Christianity.

But Christian vocabulary is different from what you'll find in a manual. The Bible isn't a textbook of spiritual practices or a guide to being good. It's the historical record of God's revelation of Himself. It includes historical accounts, poetry, parables, and more. Many unfamiliar words are not spiritually important but are parts of the historical record. The Bible introduces us to different places, nations, and people groups, all having their own unique names. Whenever somebody asks me how to pronounce a particular name in Scripture, I'll usually tell them how, but I add, "Say it with confidence and nobody will know the difference!"

The complex language of the Bible shouldn't confound or confuse us. Instead, it should convince us that the Bible is a careful accounting of what God has done throughout history that has not been tampered with or dumbed down to make it more understandable. God's Word is simple enough to teach us to believe in God and Jesus' sacrifice on the cross just by reading it, but it is complex enough that we need the help of those who've come before us to dive into its depths. As we heard from Isaiah tonight, God can make His Word easy for us to understand or impossible. Some will hear but never understand. That's how Scripture works. It's why some brilliant people embrace it and others reject it; it's why some very simple people do too.

And that really brings us to a new question, since we've already explained why the church has its own vocabulary. The next question is this: why should learn the special terms we find in Scripture? *Simply put, God commands the faithful to love Him with our entire selves, including our minds, and loving God that way is our first priority.*

In Deuteronomy 6, God commands us to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. He says to talk about His Holy Word everywhere, to teach it to our kids, to talk about it at home and on the road, day and night, to have our houses and garments covered with Scripture.

The Jewish people took God literally and wore leather boxes on their heads and arms to morning prayer. (Some Orthodox Jews still do this today!) But God meant for us to have His Word on our hearts and minds all the time, wherever we went, whatever we were doing, and to make sure that our children are brought up to know and love God and His Word too.

God made promises about that. God sent Isaiah to warn the people, and they hated his words rather than turning to God. But God said, “Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.” If they would only seek God’s wisdom and understanding, if they would let their hearts change as they absorbed His Word into their lives, God would heal them inside and out.

Jesus confirmed this with the teacher of the Law in today’s passage from Mark. Jesus says that the command to love God with everything we have is the greatest of all, and to love your neighbor as yourself. The teacher says, “Obeying these two commands is worth more than any sacrifice you could make.” Jesus replies, “You are not far from the Kingdom of God.” Can you imagine that? Very few people were ever complimented by Jesus like this man was.

At the same time, the answer scared people. The Jewish people relied on the sacrificial system to make them right with God. But this man knew that God wanted obedience, not sacrifices, and there was no way to be truly obedient. One final sacrifice would have to be made – the sacrifice of Jesus Himself – so that we could be accepted by God the Father into the Kingdom. By that sacrifice, even our weak and halting attempts to love would be accepted by God as righteous through our faith in Christ.

So what stops us from living it out? Our lives are hectic. This last week was crazy as I worked on two sermons, prepared for work camp, and took care of the boys while Catha was away. It was nuts. And we all live in the same kind of crazy. It is hard to set aside a moment to get into the Bible, let alone study what we don’t understand. We’ll talk about that more next week. But it’s hard. We are under a time crunch to accomplish everything we have to do.

The ancient Jews had different problems, but they still felt the crunch. They didn’t have copies of Scripture; they had to go to the synagogue to study God’s Word. Most young boys memorized the first five books of the Bible so they always had it in mind. Just to survive, work took up every day but the Sabbath, so finding time for God was tough then too. It is hard to love God with all you’ve got when you’ve got mouths to feed and bills to pay, no matter what era.

And yet we find time for what we want to do. I read a quote that convicted me recently. It said, “You’ll get no sympathy...if you watch Netflix ten hours a week but complain you have no time to be a...theologian. At the end of the day, we make time for what is important, and if being a...theologian is a priority, you will find a way to schedule it.”

And when we seek understanding and knowledge from God’s Word, God blesses us! Listen to Proverbs 3: “Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace.”

Paul writes to Timothy, “Train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.” Jesus said to us, “Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

So how do we do it? How do we learn from Jesus and gain wisdom as we seek to understand those things we don’t yet comprehend? Here’s some simple advice. When you come across a word in your Bible or in a sermon that you don’t know, write it down somewhere. Make a list. Most Bibles have extra pages in the back for notes – make a list of vocabulary you want to explore. If there’s a concept you don’t fully grasp – let’s say you’re not sure exactly how salvation works or what justification means – make a note of it on paper and seek it out. Most of us have theological dictionaries in our pockets. We have terms and concepts at our fingertips complements of the Internet.

You also have a guide to help you. My role as pastor is as a shepherd – to guide you towards God’s pastures. Pastors are often seen as public speakers who lead an organization and comfort people in the midst of life’s troubles. Sometimes, the pastor is seen as the guy paid to pray for us and keep God happy with us. But the model of the rabbi, the model of Jesus? He helped people understand the Scripture and wrestle with its meaning and God’s call on our lives.

What I was trained for in seminary as much as anything else was understanding Scripture. While I am a public speaker, a leader, even a chaplain at times, my chief role is to help you become the man or woman God intends you to be in Christ. Not to take your place, because I can’t have your relationship with God for you! Instead, I’m to be guide along the way! You can choose not to ask for directions – that’s a problem for most of us guys – or you can take a moment to get your questions answered, just like we’ve been doing in this series.

Talk to me, email me, call me. I am here for you. If there’s something you don’t understand, don’t be afraid. Many others before you didn’t understand. I didn’t understand! I still remember in high school going through theological books in our church library trying to make sense of things I’d heard from our pastor. At General Assembly a couple of weeks ago, I heard about pastors around the world who desperately want a theological education so they can explain the Bible to their congregations. God has given you a resource to use – so ask!

It is well worth it for you to take a few moments to clear away cobwebs in your understanding of Christian terminology. It will draw you closer to God. It will also increase your confidence! Most of us don’t talk about our faith out of fear that someone will ask us something we can’t answer. But it doesn’t need to be that way! Once you know, you can be confident in your own relationship with God, and confident in approaching others.

Just as I was writing this paragraph, two Jehovah’s Witnesses came to the door wanting to talk to me. These guys don’t even know what historic Christianity is, but they are willing to share a twisted version of it, and they know it well enough to talk about it and confuse those who don’t know their stuff. We believe in historic Christianity that has been proven and studied and confirmed for two thousand years. Imagine the confidence you can have in your conversations with friends and neighbors with just a little study!

And don't be worried you can't learn it. God is behind you in this. When the 72 disciples came back from telling the towns and villages about Jesus, sharing all their stories, Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure."

He doesn't make it so only smart people can understand Christianity. Truth is, when we come with a simple heart like a little child, one not burdened by doubt and pride and ego, He works in us and helps us truly understand the gospel. Paul writes, "Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong." God can use you, no matter if you have a Ph.D or never made it through high school, as long as you are willing.

One final thought as I close today: this may sound difficult, and it is work. But you'll find along the way that there are many things you don't need to know. We've developed what's sometimes called "Christian-ese." It's language that sounds biblical, it might be derived from the Bible, but really isn't necessary and might hurt our sharing of Jesus in public.

For example, many people refer to something called "the sinner's prayer." The sinner's prayer is a prayer you pray when you first confess to being a sinner, ask God's forgiveness and cleansing of our sin, and become a follower of Jesus. It's something we should all do in some fashion. But you won't find the sinner's prayer as such in the Bible. And as important as it is to start your relationship with God by asking for forgiveness, it's far more important to keep the faith, to keep asking for God's help and victory over sin, and to continue follow God's ways.

Some terms are just human ideas, too. If you've ever heard of things you've never read in the Bible like being "slain in the Spirit" or "the second blessing," they're really ideas that certain churches believe in that most don't. When we get tangled up in sounding like Christians so we fit in, sometimes we isolate ourselves from people we need to reach. Again, if you get confused about terms, especially ones you can't find in the Bible, take a moment and talk to me. Look them up. And get your spiritual thought life in order.

The church does have its own language, but it's a good thing. The Bible helps us know that Jesus Christ really did do what He said He would do, and through believing in Him, we can begin to please God and live life according to His ways. When we commit to knowing God, even the sometimes difficult language about Him, we are on the road to pleasing Him more and more.