

Becky loves Mel Gibson. She's seen all his movies. She has bought every magazine that has ever featured him. And every night Becky scours the Internet for new articles about Mel Gibson. In fact, Becky knows more about Mel than any person other than Mel. But Becky does not know Mel Gibson! She is not in a relationship with Mel. She is not a friend of Mel. In fact, Becky has never even met Mel. So at best, Becky only knows facts about Mel Gibson.

When it comes to Becky's mistaken way of trying to build a relationship with Mel Gibson, it is easy to see the absurdity. But when it comes to building a relationship with God, it is just as easy to miss seeing how WE can be tempted to do something similar. We can approach the Bible as a kind of miracle book that we think gives us eternal life by merely knowing what it says, rather than as a tool through which God can help us enter into - and deepen - relationship with Him.

We can learn what the Bible says, and rather than listen for what God might be trying to say to us through what it says hold its words as if they were divine and merely knowing them saves us. And worst of all, we can think that the knowledge we get from the Bible, and the wisdom that can come from that knowledge, automatically equates to knowing God.

Not that we are the first to make that mistake. Throughout the gospels, we read how Jesus battled people who thought that because they knew the Laws of Moses they were in relationship with God. In John 5, for instance, Jesus healed a crippled man. John tells us "*the day on which this took place was a Sabbath.*" So the religious police (whom we looked at last week) rushed in, and objected to the man carrying his mat because they knew the Laws of Moses, and declared that on the Sabbath "*the law forbids you to carry your mat.*" In reply, Jesus said "*You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about Me, yet you refuse to come to Me to have life.*"

When it comes to the mission and ministry of the Church, it is equally easy to make that same mistake. Rather than seeing the church as the entity through which God is seeking to draw people into relationship with Him and deepen that relationship over time, we can view the church merely as a dispenser of facts about God. But taking that approach to the ministries of the Church turns it into a seminary. In general, seminaries are good things. Seminaries train people to lead churches by equipping them with the foundational knowledge they need. Seminaries teach students about the Bible in classes with titles like "Paul's Missionary Letters." Seminaries teach students about theology in classes with titles like "Systematic Theology." And seminaries to teach students about church history in classes with titles like "The Early Church Fathers."

But the facts taught in seminary classes do not have the power to make someone a Christian. As a result, an atheist could sit through the classes and never become a Christian. That is because facts have no saving power. So when the Church tries to conduct its ministries in a seminary style, it encounters this reality as people end up being pointed away from the one thing Jesus spoke about being necessary (a relationship with Him) as they spend their time engaging their minds with biblical facts.

We see this in Sunday School curriculums, for instance, when kids are given “Word Search Puzzles” in which they circle the words in their lesson, but with little thought being given to how this helps them get to know Jesus or deepen their relationship with Him. We also see this with adults in worship services when they are encouraged to fill in blank lines on an insert tied to that day’s sermon, with little thought being given to how acting like religious stenographers may get in the way of experiencing the presence of God in worship.

Such realities are not the case because facts about God are of NO importance. Facts are good things. Facts are just not the most important thing. In the book The 1 Thing, Thom Schultz explains this when he writes “*I’ve known Joani for twenty years. But I’m still learning about her. That’s because it wasn’t my mastery of information about her that brought us together. Our wedding wasn’t a final exam. If it had been, I don’t think I would have passed. I might not even pass today! There are all sorts of Joani facts I haven’t mastered. For example, she has a multitude of relatives. But I can’t tell you the names of half of them! I’m just thankful she cares more about our relationship than my mental cataloging of her family tree.*”

In a similar way, God wants us to learn about Him. But the purpose isn’t just to know facts. God wants us to know what He is like so we know who it is with whom we are speaking. God wants us to understand what He considers holy behavior. But the purpose isn’t just to know what God thinks is holy. It is so we don’t harm our relationship with Him by living in unholy ways. God wants us to know right from wrong. But the purpose isn’t just so we know which is which. It is so we can remain in fellowship with God and His other children by not doing things that break relationships apart. That is because God is a Being, and doing things that harm our relationship with that Being is no better than saying to our spouse “*I’m sorry I went out on a date. I forgot we were married.*”

So facts are important, but only in how they help us establish - and deepen - a relationship with God. For this reason, facts about God, the history of the Church, and where our congregation fits into the picture of the numerous Christian denominations, are good things to know. But they are not the 1 thing. Which doesn’t mean that we should not attend Bible studies, or participate in Sunday School classes, or cease reading our Bible. What it means is that we should remember as we participate in such things that they are merely the means to an end: the goal is not just to learn Bible facts but to enter into relationship with God and deepen our relationship with Him each new day through what those facts tell us about God, about ourselves, and how God invites us to enter into - and deepen - a relationship with Him.

We see this when we turn to the passage from Corinthians. Corinth was a major Roman city. It sat along a major Roman trade route. Philosophers often wandered through, sages often passed by, and religious and philosophical schools of thought eventually took root in the minds of the city’s residents. This caused the Corinthians to think of themselves as people of wisdom. As Paul opened his letter, he therefore reminded them that knowledge alone was not the most important thing in life, asking sarcastically “*where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher?*”

The reason he did so is that he wanted the Corinthians to understand that knowledge alone does not give meaning to life. He wanted them to know that knowledge alone does not help make sense of the tragic events of life (like a pandemic). And he wanted them to know that the wisdom that can come from knowledge does not automatically quench a person's spiritual thirst. This is because we were created "*in the image of God*," and a major part of that image is to live in community like the Triune God.

We see why Paul thought this in what he wrote about the cross. For the cross "*is foolishness to those who are perishing*," Paul wrote. And the reason he said that is the "*message of the cross*" is not a list of facts to know, but a call to enter into, and deepen, a relationship with God. The "*message of the cross*" is not a list of academic teachings we must learn, but the invitation to enter into, and deepen, a relationship with our neighbor. The "*message of the cross*" is not the instruction to join a seminary style church so we can learn Bible facts, but the call to enter a community of faith whose purpose it is to foster - and deepen - our relationship with a Divine Being whom we trust - and seek - with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. For if we don't, Paul says that we will turn out to be fools because Jesus taught He is "*the way and the truth and the life*," and not facts, not knowledge, nor the wisdom that comes from facts and knowledge.

This is why Paul said in today's passage that "*the world through its wisdom did not know him*," but God "*was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe*." Paul understood that 'believing' in Jesus does not just mean hearing facts about Him, and making the decision that it seems logical to believe He is the Son of God. He knew that 'believing' in Jesus does not just mean acknowledging He had come to save humanity from sin, and declaring we want that to happen for us. He realized that 'believing' in Jesus does not just mean we think the Bible is true, and accept its teachings as valuable. This is because 'believing' in Jesus means asking Jesus to send His Holy Spirit into our heart so we can respond to Him as the "*way, the truth, and the life*" by entering into relationship with Him, and seeking each day afterward to allow Him to deepen that relationship through His grace.

We see this in a relationship building opportunity called Disciple Bible study. More important than the title of that study, however, is its sub-title: "Making Disciples Through Bible study." That is because Bishop Wilke, the author of the study manuals, understood what Jesus meant when He told Martha "*only one thing is necessary*." He understood what Paul meant when he wrote "*the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing*," but is (for those who seek to enter into relationship with God through the grace of Jesus Christ and grow deeper in that relationship through the Holy Spirit) "*the power*" to be in relationship with God because it reminds us of the lengths to which God goes to be in relationship with us.

For that reason, there is an invitation on in insert in your worship bulletin today, an in the announcements in the weekly email and on our website. That invitation is to join the next Disciple 1 Bible study that will start in January. I encourage you to be part of it if you have not already been through it. And if you have been through Disciple 1, I invite you to join the Disciple 2 Bible study that will also start in January. Not because I want you to become a Bible scholar. Not because the

Leadership Team wants you to learn Bible facts. And not because your seminary style church tells you that knowledge about God automatically saves you.

You are being invited to be involved in one of these studies because God uses the facts of the Bible to enable people to enter into relationship with Him. God uses the facts of the Bible to enable people to deepen their relationship with Him. And God uses facts of the Bible to equip people to help their loves ones, friends, and neighbors enter into (and deepen) relationship with God. For that is the one thing Jesus told Martha is “*necessary*,” to KNOW Jesus, to GROW in relationship with Jesus, and to GO forth in the power of His Holy Spirit to invite others into relationship with Jesus. For that is not only what this current worship series is about, it is also the very heart of what Paul labeled as “*the message of the cross*,” and the 1 thing we would be foolish not to seek. Let us then use the facts of the Bible to seek that one thing above all else.