Why We Don't Worship The Bible
Matthew 22:34—46; Psalm 1

So what's the gist? Has anyone ever asked you to provide the 'gist' of what happened last week —or even the gist of your entire life? It happens; and usually we're ready with a brief, succinct synopsis or summary. People sometimes refer to the 30,000-foot view of a complex topic; and what they mean is they're not going to '*get into the weeds'* or the nitty-gritty details. A 30,000-foot view is a view *in general*, from high above what's happens on the ground. I've attended seminars and conferences in which the speakers invite the audience members to prepare an 'elevator speech'—and what they mean is, if we happen to get stuck in an elevator with a person for 30 seconds to a minute, there might be an opportunity to say something, to sell something, to get a job interview… or even to share the good news of God's love in Christ. Similarly, back in middle school, when the teacher assigned a book report, and I procrastinated too long, and didn't have enough time to read all the chapters of *Moby Dick*, there's was always the *Cliff Notes* version of what happens to Captain Ahab; and, spoiler-alert, it doesn't go well… Of course, fast-forward a few decades, to this decade, and there's *Google*. We can always *Google* a synopsis; we can always consult a Chatbot, and when that Artificial Intelligence serves up the bullet-points, we've got the gist—and the book report is nearly written for us.

Now, what interests me this morning is how the Pharisees ask Jesus for the GIST. In other words, rather than scrolling through the 613 commandments in the actual Hebrew Bible, and trying to trip him up on the minutia, they cut to the chase: *'What's the greatest thing there is to glean from the commandments? Summarize it for us. Give us your elevator speech.'*

Well, surprise! Surprise! He does. Jesus doesn't mess around with a parable. He doesn't ask for a denarius and talk about what belongs to the emperor and what belongs to God. He doesn't place a child in the midst of them and declare whoever doesn't become like this little child shall never enter the kingdom of God, which might be a little confusing. In a very straightforward way, Jesus obliges his interrogators with a two-fold summary:

"'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and the first commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

So far, so good. Matthew's Gospel doesn't report whether or not the Pharisees were satisfied with this synopsis. But if I could infer anything by their *lack* of a come-back, I'd assume they couldn't think of anything to say. They *were* satisfied. For the time being, they were content with the gist. But what about Jesus? As of verse 41, *he* has a question; and the question stems from the weeds. The question grows out of the nitty-gritty details of Psalm 110, verse one:

"The Lord said to my Lord,
'Sit at my right hand,
until I put your enemies under your feet.'"

So, it turns out, after all is said and done, and after the Pharisees seem content with the 30,000-foot view of what the Bible says, Jesus isn't: ***"If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?"*** Hmmm. I wonder. I wonder because Jesus wonders before me, beside me and after me. And it's strange and awkward that he doesn't answer his own question; he just let's it hang there in the open air. And that's where it wafts around this morning among the flies who bang their heads on the window pane. Don't you see it? Don't you hear it buzzing? Don't you feel it tickling the hairs on the back your neck?

Ultimately, Jesus isn't about to quiz us on our Bible knowledge—or whether we have all our doctrines right. As the Word of God in flesh and blood, utterly unique in the messy history of creation, he's offering himself. And this, my brothers and sisters in Christ, is what Presbyterians believe. Jesus himself is the Word of God, the Son of God, the Full Expression and Demonstration of the Divine Character. And, as you can tell, it's Bible passages like this one that prompt us to wonder about that—and perhaps believe that. But Jesus, I can't tell you the number of times that people have insinuated that Presbyterians don't believe in the Bible. And I'm here to call those insinuations out. Presbyterian Christians *do* believe in the Bible. Here it is—that best selling collection of 66 translatable Hebrew books and 27 translatable Greek gospels and letters and oracles. Here it is; and I believe the words on these printed pages carry authority and convey good news. *But I don't worship it.* By the power of the Spirit of Christ, I worship Yahweh and the Word that Yahweh expresses to me is Jesus—his life, his death and resurrection. And what I'm suggesting to you is that Jesus himself doesn't worship the Bible either.

As I may have mentioned to you before, my father worked as an automobile mechanic, and with my uncle and grandmother, owned *Pyle's Auto Service* for nearly forty years. So you might think I know everything there is to know about cars. You might think I know how to change the oil or a fan belt. But, you'd be wrong. What I know is *the gist.* And one day, when my Dad bought me a Plymouth Duster, I knew the gas; I knew the brake; I knew the windshield wipers. But what I knew most of all was that, if anything went wrong and I didn't understand how to fix it, the love of my father would be there. He'd show up… Do you get my analogy?

The Bible will frequently need fixing—and by that, I mean, INTERPRETATION. It's the vehicle of God's people, moving from here to there. But, ultimately, every word and every space between the words is pointing to the Love of God in Christ Jesus. Consider, as evidence, what both Matthew and Luke record as Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. According to Matthew 4:6 and according to Luke 4:10—11, the devil quotes the Bible *to* Jesus; and in response he doesn't throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple; he quotes another scripture passage. Jesus puts verse against verse; and somehow, in this desert-experience, he's nourished and sustained by the tension. Why? How? Could it be that Satan is satisfied with the bullet points while Jesus is not? Could it be that Satan has done his *Google* research and finds those passages which already support his position while Jesus always has another sacred text to gnaw on? It's fascinating to me that, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus repeatedly cites passages from Deuteronomy about *murder, adultery, marriage, divorce* and *bearing false witness* (which is to say, lying); and each time, he says, ***"You've heard it said… but I say to you…"*** He's interpreting. Jesus interprets the Hebrew Scriptures available to him as a *means* to come alongside us and to ask this question: ***"What do you think of the Messiah?"*** And he's still asking.

In other words—what do *WE* think? No one is being bullied into believing here. What do *WE* think—even those who wrote the Old and New Testaments—what do we think of *an Anointed Human Being, who <u>possibly</u> makes manifest the most loving and merciful character of the Creator of All Things, Seen and Unseen?* Now, let's not cheat! Let's not respond to that question with bullet points! Or bullets! Let's not ask the *Google* chatbot to answer for us!

In the first season of *The Diplomat*, a series on *Netflix,* the President of the United States dies, and the Supreme Court Justice has to swear in the Vice President. And yet, because this transition happens hastily, overseas, in a foreign embassy, and no one can find a Bible, they grab the thickest tome from the library; and it turns out the new president is sworn into office while giving her solemn oath on *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire.* And the point, I suppose these creators of the series are trying to make, is it doesn't matter. People will get the gist.

In the 2010 film, *Book of Eli*, starring Denzel Washington, the main character's traipsing through an apocalyptic and desolate landscape… while, apparently, most of the literate people in the world have been obliterated. Within the backpack of this mysterious figure, however, there's a book, a book that the surviving marauders will kill for. And so, Eli protects it. He protects the book, but not only that, each night, he reads from it. By contrast, the villain in the movie, named Carnegie, sends out his savage gangs, week after week, to sift through the rubble and to find what they'll never really ponder, much less read. And here's how Carnegie describe the Bible:

"*IT'S A WEAPON! A weapon aimed right at the hearts and minds of the weak and the desperate. It will give us control of them. If we want to rule more than one small town, we have to have it. People will come from all over, they'll do exactly what I tell 'em if the words are from the book. It's happened before and it'll happen again. All we need is that book."*

Listen: when Psalm 1 says, ***"Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread or sit in the seat of scoffers,"*** I have no problem picturing the scene. ***The advice of the wicked*** can include biblical citations. ***The path that sinners tread*** can involve us in steps that appear to be sponsored by a biblical story. ***The seat of the scoffers*** can become easily cushioned with biblical platitudes.

So here's why I'm inviting you, encouraging you, and hoping that we won't become a mob of people who worship the Bible: it's NOT a weapon; it's NOT a tool used for political propaganda; it's NOT a paper weight for the coffee table; it's NOT a repository for my own family memorabilia; it's NOT something to swear by in court… The Holy Bible IS Holy—and BECOMES Holy—because of the Holy One to Whom it points.

I was visiting one of my hospice patients; and after reading Psalm 139—***"O Lord, you have searched me and known me; you know when I sit down and when I rise up… you search out my path…"***—I looked up and with the Bible in my hand I gestured to some pictures of her family on the wall. Next to those was a sign that read, *"Do Not Resuscitate."* And beside that: the image of Jesus, with a crown of thorns… It was all a blur, I suppose, because she didn't have her glasses on. But when I pointed with the Bible extended out in the air, the first thing she said was *"Jesus is coming to help me!"* and *"I love God!"*

And then, you see, I put the Bible down; and she grabbed my hand. And held on.