

# Sermon Note: The Gospel Truth

## Second Sunday after the Epiphany

### Introduction

As we continue our worship series *Wrestling with Doubt, Finding Faith*, we turn to a question that underscores a lot of other questions: How do we approach the Bible? For some, scripture has been a source of comfort and clarity. For others, it has felt confusing, internally conflicted, or even used to keep score. And when that happens, it can be hard to know what to do with the Bible.

This week we are exploring our sacred text critically and faithfully. Psalm 119 calls God’s word a lamp for the next step, not a floodlight for the whole road. Second Timothy reminds us that scripture is “inspired” and “useful” for forming lives of integrity. And in John 14, Jesus speaks about truth as something we live into: a way, a relationship, a life. If you have ever wanted to be shaped by scripture and found yourself stuck trying to win, you are not alone. The goal is not to settle every question. The goal is to take the next faithful step.

### Illustration Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8x0COtH4Vrw>

In this clip from *Dead Poets Society* (1989), Mr. Keating invites his students to challenge a rigid, score-based approach to poetry and recover a more living way of reading.

### Why This Video?

This scene works as an allegory for how many people have experienced the Bible. The student’s poetry textbook offers a tidy method: measure, rank, evaluate, and assume you have reached the “correct” meaning. It feels clean and controllable, and it can also turn something meant to be alive into something people use to draw lines and keep score.

Mr. Keating’s point is not that discipline and careful reading are pointless. His point is that a method can become a substitute for essence, emotion, and inspiration. When Scripture is treated mainly as an instrument to prove who is right, it stops functioning as “a lamp to my feet.” It becomes a weapon, and people either learn to use it or learn to avoid it.

This second week of our series, we are talking about the Bible as inspired and useful, and also deeply human. We are treating Scripture as the collected witness of God’s people—words born from encounter with the living, loving God, an outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace—and also as a library that requires wisdom, context, and humility. And we are keeping Jesus at the center: John 1 calls Jesus the Logos, the Word, and Jesus is the clearest revelation of God’s character and the lens through which Christians read everything else.

## Video Discussion Questions

1. What is the tone of the textbook passage Mr. Keating has the class read? What kind of relationship to poetry does it assume?
2. When Mr. Keating says “Excrement,” what is he reacting against—an idea, a posture, a power dynamic, something else?
3. Mr. Keating frames this as “a battle...a war,” and warns that “the casualties could be your hearts and souls.” What do you think he means by that?
4. What do you make of the command to rip out the page? Does it feel liberating, manipulative, theatrical, necessary, reckless? Something else?
5. Mr. Keating pauses to reassure the class that tearing out pages is not a religious faux pas. What does that reveal about the kind of fear the students are carrying, and how does Mr. Keating try to break its hold?
6. Mr. Keating says, “No matter what anybody tells you, words and ideas can change the world.” When have you seen words make a real-life difference—for good or for harm?
7. Which line from Mr. Keating lands most strongly for you right now: “think for yourselves,” “savor words and language,” or “what will your verse be?” Maybe something else? Why?
8. If you were one of the students in that room, what would you be feeling in your body in that moment—relief, anxiety, excitement, resistance, confusion?
9. Mr. Keating lists “medicine, law, business, engineering” as necessary, and says “poetry, beauty, romance, love” are what we stay alive for. What do you think he is professing here?
10. At the end, Mr. Keating repeats the verse: “That the powerful play goes on and you may contribute a verse.” What do you want your “verse” to be—right now, not someday?

## Psalm 119:105 (NRSVue)

<sup>105</sup>Your word is a lamp to my feet  
and a light to my path.

## 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (CEB)

<sup>16</sup>Every scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for showing mistakes, for correcting, and for training character, <sup>17</sup>so that the person who belongs to God can be equipped to do everything that is good.

## John 14:6 (CEB)

<sup>6</sup>Jesus answered, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

## Scripture Study Questions

1. Psalm 119:105 uses two images: “a lamp to my feet” and “a light to my path.” What kind of guidance do those images suggest—what is illuminated, and what is still left in shadow?
2. When you want God to show you the whole path at once, what helps you accept “enough light for the next step”?
3. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says that scripture is useful for teaching, showing mistakes, correcting, and training character. Which of those would you welcome more readily, and which might you tend to resist? Why?

4. 2 Timothy continues, saying scripture equips “the person who belongs to God” to do “everything that is good.” What kinds of “good work” do you think scripture is meant to form in a person—not in theory, but in ordinary life?
5. What is the difference between reading sacred text as a proof-text to win an argument and reading it as a guide intended to shape character?
6. John 14:6 is spoken to disciples who are unsettled and afraid. If you hear it as comfort, what do you hear Jesus promising? If it \*doesn't\* feel comfortable to you, what do you hear?
7. What does it sound like to treat Jesus as “the way” and “the life,” not only “the truth”? How might that reshape your experience of God in your life?
8. When you encounter passages that seem to pull in different directions, what do you do to read the text honestly and with humility? What happens when you read this way?
9. If you could ask one question of scripture—not as a debate tactic, but for genuine learning—what would you ask?
10. What is one practice that helps you read the Bible as a means of grace: reading slowly, reading in community, praying before you read, journaling, asking better questions, or something else?

### **Weekly Action**

This week, set aside 10–15 minutes on three different days. During that time, read Psalm 119:105 slowly three times. After the first reading, ask yourself what you want from this reading: certainty, an answer, a plan, closure. After the second reading, ask: *What might it mean for this to shape me, not help me keep score?* After the third reading, write one sentence starting with: “The next step illuminated for me is...”

### **Prayer**

God of living breath, breathe again on your people as we seek inspiration in scripture. Give us humility when our reading unsettles us, and steadiness when it comforts us. Free us from fear-based reading and from the impulse to grab verses to keep score. Train our character through what is true and life-giving, and teach us to take the next faithful step when we don't see the full path ahead. Help us to keep Jesus at the center of everything—the clearest revelation of your love, the Word who draws all words toward grace. Amen.

*Disclosure: This content was developed by Rev. Bob Rhodes using AI tools in alignment with La Jolla UMC AI Usage Guidelines. In this case, AI assisted the author with initial drafting, ideation, structural revisions, and language refinement. All final text was reviewed and approved by Rev. Rhodes.*