

## JESUS IS ASKING “Haven’t You Read?”

Dear Friends in Christ,

There are three words in the English language that can make the strongest man weak in the knees, make the most courageous man fearful, and make the most intelligent man dim-witted. Those three words are: SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED. Whether it’s a child’s toy or a piece of patio furniture or an item from IKEA, “some assembly required” can often mean hours of frustrated effort to transform just a few disconnected pieces into the desired finished product.

Decades ago I learned a valuable lesson which has helped me get through the “some assembly required” times of life. I was putting together a child’s riding toy, a very simple task, just a few parts. As the pieces came out of the box, I could see how they fit together so I started snapping and fastening the components together, no problem. . . left side, right side, floor boards, roof, wheels. All that was left was the steering device, but try as I might, I just couldn’t get it in place. Finally, after an appreciable amount of effort, I resorted to unfolding and reading the instructions. There, in print, it said very clearly, “make sure steering device is installed before attaching the roof and the sides to the vehicle. If I had read that instruction first, I could have spared myself a lot of time and frustration. If I had read the instructions first, I wouldn’t have made the mistake that caused me so much trouble.

Our summer sermon series *JESUS IS ASKING* consists of questions Jesus asked during his earthly ministry. Today’s question: *Haven’t You Read?* From Matthew 12 we listen again to verses 2&3:

<sup>2</sup> *When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath."* <sup>3</sup> *He answered, "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry?"*

Ten times in the gospel accounts and six times alone in the Gospel of Matthew Jesus asks the question “Haven’t You Read?” (Matthew 12:3, 12:5, 19:4, 21:16, 21:42, 22:31). It’s interesting to note that every time Jesus asked this question, he asked it of the religious leaders of his day. Now you’d expect a religious leader to have read his Bible wouldn’t you? Yet, it was to the rabbis, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Chief Priests, Scribes and Elders that Jesus posed this question. “Haven’t You Read?”

The setting for today’s question is this: Jesus and his disciples were walking through a grain field with the Pharisees hot on their heels. The Pharisees weren’t there to learn from Jesus, they were there to spy on him. They wanted to find Jesus doing or saying something that would expose him as the fraud they thought he was. The Pharisees thought they had found their evidence when they observed Jesus’ disciples stripping grain from the stalks in the field and popping the kernels into their mouth as they walked. Now, the Pharisees weren’t about to

accuse Jesus' disciples of stealing, because in his instructions to Moses, God had allowed his people to go into their neighbor's field and pluck a few stalks of grain to eat. (Deuteronomy 23:25). No, what made the Pharisees think they had a case against Jesus was that he had allowed his disciples to pluck grain on the Sabbath, the day of rest.

Now it's true that God had commanded his Old Testament people not to work on the Sabbath (Saturday), but the Pharisees had added their own rules, 619 of them to be exact, to God's original command. In so doing, the Pharisees missed the whole point of the commandments. They thought the purpose of the commandments was to provide God with a way of determining who was good enough to be among the "righteous."

It is true that God gives us his laws to be obeyed, but the reason he wants his commands obeyed is because they really do make life better for us. That's what the psalmist meant when he said about the ordinances, the commands of the Lord: "In keeping them there is great reward." Psalm 19:9-11 (NIV). All of God's commands are meant to be a blessing. Take any one of God's laws and you will see that God gave it for our good, to keep us safe, for order in society, or to protect the family, not to make life difficult.

The Pharisees thought that God's commands were simply there to be obeyed. They were more concerned about the laws than they were for the people for whom those laws had been made. This showed in the Pharisees' attitude towards the disciples who were plucking grain on the Sabbath. They didn't care that the disciples were hungry. They were only concerned that by plucking grain, the disciples, as the Pharisees saw it, were "harvesting" and were therefore guilty of breaking the 3rd Commandment.

To show the Pharisees that "the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27), Jesus didn't even bother to remind them that the disciples had not broken a God-given law, but only a man-made regulation that had no validity. Jesus responded on a higher level, pointing out that the law of love might at times contradict ceremonial laws without making someone guilty of sin. As a matter of fact, there are times when it would be wrong not to violate the letter of some ceremonial laws.

Jesus used as an example an incident from King David's life. One time when David and his men were on the run from King Saul, they stopped in on the high priest Abiathar, and asked him for something to eat. (1 Samuel 21). The only thing the high priest had on hand was the bread in the tabernacle, bread that was to be eaten only by priests. This is the bread that Abiathar gave to David, yet God didn't charge the high priest with wrongdoing even though David and his men were not priests. Although Abiathar had technically broken the law by giving David the tabernacle bread, the law of love, concern for David and his men, superseded the ceremonial law. So it was ridiculous now for these Pharisees to condemn Jesus' disciples for something that was not even a violation of any God-given ceremonial law.

Furthermore, Jesus pointed out that even though most physical labor was forbidden on the Sabbath, God himself required his priests to do physical labor on the Sabbath. For example,

butchering sheep was forbidden labor on the Day of Rest, yet God had commanded the priests, “*On the Sabbath day, make an offering of two lambs a year old . . .*” (Numbers 28:9). Although they were involved in real physical labor, no one accused the priests at the temple of sinning by butchering and sacrificing the sheep on the Sabbath.

“*Haven’t You Read?*” If the Pharisees had spent more time reading Scripture instead of trying to devise traps for Jesus, they would’ve seen the fallacy of their argument. “Haven’t you read” Jesus asked, “about the divine principle expressed by the prophet Hosea? “*I desire mercy, not sacrifice.*” (Hosea 6:6). Anytime there might be an apparent conflict between the ceremonial laws and human needs, God tells us to do whatever is necessary to be merciful to someone in need.<sup>7</sup> *If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent.* “Go back and read the instructions and you won’t make this mistake.”

Here were people who should’ve known better, Pharisees. People who should’ve read and been informed about God’s word and God’s will, but they were uninformed on some very important teachings which God had clearly revealed in his word. In this instance Jesus was making the point, “If you had read and studied the scriptures, you wouldn’t even raise this particular issue to begin with. The answer to the question you are asking is found in scripture. Haven’t you read the scriptures?”

This question of Jesus is still a valid question today. In today’s world there are fewer and fewer people who know what the Bible really says. There are fewer and fewer people who can put their lives together and make sense of their existence because they haven’t “read the instructions.” There are more and more people who are making bad decisions and wrong choices because they don’t have a correct knowledge of God’s will as revealed in God’s Word.

Sadly, there are examples of this even within the body of believers. In many of our churches, pastors and elders must confront straying sheep and ask this same question. To the person who has stopped coming to church we ask, “Haven’t you read what God says about neglecting regular worship and reception of the sacraments?” To young people living together out of wedlock we ask, “Haven’t you read what God says about the sin of adultery?” To someone seeking an unscriptural divorce we ask, “Haven’t you read what God says about the sanctity of marriage?” To someone seeking to wrongfully terminate a pregnancy we ask, “Haven’t you read what God says about the taking of a life?” We use God’s Word not only because it has the power and the authority to rebuke and correct, but because it also has the power to impart forgiveness to those who are repentant, to strengthen and to heal.

God has given each person a conscience as a personal monitor of what is right and what is wrong. But your conscience is only as accurate as your knowledge of God’s will. Let me give you some examples. How many of you know people who honestly believe it is a sin to partake of any form of alcohol? These people’s consciences are giving them inaccurate information of what is wrong because they have made an inaccurate reading of scriptures. On the other hand, some people think that abortion is completely permissible. Their conscience tells them it’s right

because the courts of the land say it is allowable and because they haven't read and understood the truth of God's Word. God has given us the absolute measure of what is right and what is wrong in his Word. As you read the Bible and grow in your knowledge of God's will, your conscience will have accurate standards for telling you what is right and what is wrong.

Now let's bring all this a little closer to home. 'Haven't you read?' is a rebuke you and I often deserve. How many times haven't you worked to avoid a religious topic or backed out of a conversation about some current social issue because you were afraid you didn't know what to say? The next time you politely close the door on Jehovah's Witnesses because you didn't really have an answer to their claim that Jesus isn't God, what would you do if you turned around and saw Jesus standing there with your Bible in his hand asking, "Haven't you read Romans 9:5 and 1 John 5:20 and John 1 and Colossians 2:9 and John 20:28?"

We pride ourselves on being Bible-believing Christians and we probably have a better trained laity than most denominations. **But too often we either don't understand a doctrine or can't explain a teaching or sometimes won't defend our church's position because we don't really know what the Bible says.** (Repeat). How would you respond if someone said, "You Lutherans just hate homosexuals, don't you?" Do you sit silently by when the conversation of your fellow-Christian friends turns to the Rapture and the Millennium? Can you explain why we baptize infants? Do you even agree with the practice of 'Member Communion'?

All the answers to all these questions and more are found in the Bible. You have many opportunities at Grace for growth in God's Word. We offer regular weekly worship and a number of weekly Bible study opportunities and personal devotional material. Our congregation's website contains downloadable sermons and Bible studies. Our Synod's website has an extensive array of Bible-based material for you to use and pass along to others.

The Bible is the instruction manual which shows how to put your life together and make sense of your existence. In the Bible you see that Jesus not only read and understood and taught all of God's Word from an early age, he has also paid for our sins of neglecting God's Word and failing to grow in our knowledge of God's will. In the Bible you see that God wants all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. And in the Bible you see that God has chosen to use you as his witness to share the message of salvation through faith in Jesus. It's all there in God's Word. Haven't you read it?

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father,

We give you thanks and honor and praise for the gift of your Word. Guide us into your Word that we read and learn and understand all your teachings and truths. Kindle in us a desire to grow in our knowledge of your Word and help us to be witnesses of your love to the world around us.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.