

The Problem Of Biblical Illiteracy

INTRODUCTION:

- I. It's a book that most people claim to love and trust, and a book that is often read with great interest.
 - A. Plus it's the top selling book in the world, and yet so few really understand its message, and fewer still care anything about following its great truths.
 1. What book is this?
 - a. Of course, I'm talking at the book we know as the *Bible*.
 - b. And yet, while many claim to love, trust, read and seek to understand the Bible, there is an overwhelming problem with what we can call "Biblical Illiteracy."
 - B. So, what is "Biblical Illiteracy"?
 1. Put very simply, it's the inability to understand the Bible or its teachings.
 2. But the most alarming aspect of Biblical Illiteracy is that it's not just a problem in the world at large, it's also a growing problem in the Lord's church.
 3. How bad is it?

- a. Polls among those who consider themselves religious revealed that:
 - (1). Only half could name just one of the four Gospels.
 - (2). Two-thirds couldn't identify the person who delivered the Sermon on the Mount. Some thought it was Billy Graham!
 - (3). And most weren't able to identify Genesis as the first book of the Bible.
- b. Sadly the results weren't much better among those who considered themselves as regular church-goers. One poll showed that:
 - (1). Many couldn't name more than two or three of the apostles. Some said they could name "all four" – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John!
 - (2). Six out of ten couldn't name even five of the Ten Commandments.
 - (3). Eight out of ten believed that the saying, "God helps those who help themselves" is from a verse in the Bible.
 - (4). Twelve percent believed that Joan of Arc was Noah's wife.

(5). And a survey of church-going graduating high school seniors revealed that over half thought Sodom and Gomorrah were husband and wife.

II. Why do we have such a problem with Biblical illiteracy in this country; and even more so, why do we see this problem increasing among members of the Lord's church?

A. The answer is simple. People don't read the Bible, let alone actually take the time to study and meditate on the Scriptures.

1. Theologian David Gibson called the Bible, "America's favorite unopened text."
2. George Gallup concluded, "Americans revere the Bible – but, by and large, we don't read it. And because we don't read it, we have become a nation of biblical illiterates."

B. So, this evening I want to spend a little time talking about this issue.

1. More specifically I want to help us understand why this is such a serious problem – not only for those outside of the church, but even more, for those in the Lord's church?
2. And then I want to suggest some things we can do to stamp out Biblical illiteracy among the Lord's people.

BODY:

- I. Whether or not we want to admit it, ignorance of God's Word is something God actually despises.
 - A. When we understand that the Bible came to us through divine inspiration, and that it has been accurately and infallibly preserved through divine providence, then it should come as no surprise that God wants us to read it, understand it, and faithfully obey it.
 1. And yet, Biblical illiteracy seems to have always been a problem among the Lord's people. Speaking through the prophet Hosea, God said:
 - a. **Hosea 4:1** – *"There is no truth or mercy or knowledge of God in the land."*
 - b. **Hosea 4:6** – *"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being priest for Me; because you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children."*
 2. The prophet Amos also issued a warning about this:
 - a. **Amos 8:11-13** – *"Behold, the days are coming," says the Lord God, "that I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. 12 They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord,*

but shall not find it. In that day the fair virgins and strong young men shall faint from thirst."

- b. The "thirst" of which the Lord was speaking was a thirst for divine guidance – a thirst for divine wisdom and understanding that can only come from hearing and understanding God's Word.
- B. All we have to do is simply look around us to see the outcome of a world that is ignorant of God's divinely inspired Word.
1. Our society is no different from the society in which Hosea and Amos lived.
 - a. We're thirsting for direction and guidance – thirsting for a purpose in life, and even for a meaning to life.
 - b. And, sadly, many often turn to the wrong sources for that direction and guidance – they turn to everything from self-help books to pop psychology; or from shallow emotional religious experience to Oprah and Dr. Phil.
 3. Our standards of morality are so skewed that we're finding the same problem in our society that the prophet Isaiah found in his.
 - a. **Isaiah 5:20** – *Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!*

- b. We slaughter the innocent unborn through abortion, and yet fight to spare the murderer from capital punishment.
 - c. We call "adultery" an "affair"; and call "homosexuality" an "alternate lifestyle."
 - d. We speak out against violence against women, and yet defend pornography as a First Amendment Right.
4. All the chaos and strife, all the violence and wars, all the injustices and crime, is a direct result of a society that has not only grown ignorant of God's Word, but which increasingly cares less and less about God's Word.
5. This lack of Bible-based truth and morality is not only destroying society, it's ripping apart families.
 - a. Today we're told if we're not happy with our spouse then divorce them and go find happiness with someone else.
 - b. We're also told to not worry about the impact of a broken home on our children – as one divorce counselor once told me, "divorce has no adverse effects on children... they eventually get over it."
6. Not only has our society been described in the words of Hosea, Amos and Isaiah; it is also described in the words of **Judges 21:25** – *In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*

II. But perhaps the most troubling place where Biblical illiteracy exists is in the Lord's church.

A. In case you don't think this is a problem, then consider this:

1. Churches everywhere suffer from a lack of qualified Bible teachers.

a. There are fewer and fewer men and women in the Lord's church who will volunteer to teach Bible classes.

b. And then, many of those who do volunteer don't take time to properly prepare themselves to teach their class.

c. Paul warned Timothy that there will always be those who:

1 Timothy 1:7 – . . . *desiring to be teachers of the law, understanding neither what they say nor the things which they affirm.*

2. And it's not always the teacher who fails to prepare.

a. An older preacher once told me his definition of adult Bible classes is a place where brethren assemble to share their spiritual ignorance.

b. Many come to class totally unprepared – having never opened their Bibles even once during the week.

3. Biblical illiteracy, and the spiritual ignorance it breeds, is also the reason why congregations that once stood for the truth are led away into doctrinal error.

- a. **2 Peter 2:1** – *But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction.*
- b. This is a growing problem in the Lord's church today – false teachers and their false doctrines are everywhere.
- c. They work covertly to gain the confidence of the members, and then when the opportune time comes, they move to take control of a congregation through the Bible class podium or the pulpit.
- d. Brethren, how can you possibly identify a false teacher, or recognize false teaching, if you can't tell the difference between truth and error?
- e. False teachers always feed on churches where Biblical ignorance thrives – they did it in the first century, and they're still doing it today.

III. Now that we realize this is a serious problem, what can we do to stem the tide of Biblical illiteracy in our own lives as well as in the Lord's church?

A. The answer is rather simple – far simpler than most realize.

- 1. You see, it all begins with you and me.

- a. It starts by each of us sitting down every day to privately read and meditate on God's Word.
2. The Scriptures make it crystal clear that the person who feeds on the Word of God every day is a person who's truly blessed.
 - a. **Psalms 1:1-3** – *Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; 2 but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night. 3 He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper.*
3. The benefits you receive from feeding on the Word of God daily are incalculable.
 - a. It will not only bring you closer to God by gradually increasing your understanding of His Word.
 - b. It will give you the strength, courage and hope you need to remain faithful to the Lord.
4. But first, you need to ask yourself if you're willing to do your part in stamping out Biblical illiteracy.
 - a. Are you willing to spend time every day – even for a few minutes every day – reading and meditating on the Word of God?

- (1). You won't get the spiritual wisdom, knowledge and understanding you need from simply sitting in a Bible class or listening to a few sermons every week.
 - (2). Bible classes and sermons are intended to merely augment your own personal study of the Bible – not replace it.
5. So, ask yourself if you're ready to start tomorrow investing a few minutes every day reading and meditating on the Word of God?
- B. After you've begun spending time alone with your Bible, then you'll be able to benefit others by sharing the things you've learned.
1. As Christians, we're constantly reminded about the benefits of mutual edification.
 - a. **Hebrews 3:12-13** – *Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; 13 but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.*
 - b. Exhortation, or the spiritual encouragement we receive from our brothers and sisters in Christ – especially in a Bible class – plays a major role in keeping us from departing from the living God, and from being hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.

2. In fact, the Hebrew writer expounds on this further.
 - a. **Hebrews 10:23-25** – *Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, 25 not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.*
 - b. People don't wake up one morning and think, "I think I'm going to completely forsake the Lord's church today, never to return again."
 - c. Spiritual defection happens gradually – over a period of time – by missing Bible classes and worship a little here, and a little there.
 - d. The more someone misses an opportunity to be edified and to edify others, the easier it is to miss next time.
3. We're clearly commanded to, *"consider one another in order to stir up love and good works."*
 - a. But how can we do that when we're not here for Bible classes or for worship?
4. I've known brethren who vigorously contend we must always be obedient to the commands, examples and implied inferences in the Bible.

- a. But somehow they don't seem to think that applies to being present for every Bible class or worship assembly.
 5. There's no better way to help stamp out Biblical illiteracy than to be here for every Bible study and every time of worship.
 6. But again, you need to ask yourself if you're willing to make that kind of commitment?
- C. Let me suggest another way to stamp out Biblical illiteracy.
1. Every parent needs to accept your God-given responsibility to teach your own children.
 2. The Lord commanded the children of Israel: **Deuteronomy 6:6-7** – *"And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. 7 You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up."*
 - a. You – you parents – shall teach the Lord's commandments *"diligently to your children,"* meaning you will thoroughly teach them carefully and prayerfully.
 3. However, before you can teach your children the Lord said, *"these words which I command you today shall be in your heart."*
 - a. Parents – you cannot teach what you do not know, nor can you teach others to live by principles you don't live by yourself.

4. Furthermore, the teaching you do is not just simply sitting your child down for a family Bible study, but to also look for every opportunity to teach Biblical truths and principles through every day events.
 - a. You will *"talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up."*
5. Perhaps the saddest of all statistics is the rate Biblical illiteracy is growing among our young people.
 - a. This is one of the main reasons why so many young people grow up in the church, are baptized, and then later fall away completely – if they're even baptized at all.
 - b. They grow up never learning the true value of God's Word, or how it can better enrich their lives and guide them through some difficult situations when facing peer pressure.
 - c. All too often parents think their children will get all they need to know in a Bible class and by listening to the sermons. That's simply not true.
 - d. Don't pass off your responsibility to spiritually feed and nurture your children to someone else. These dedicated Bible class teachers are there to merely augment the spiritual teaching and nourishment you are giving your children at home.

6. And never forget – it takes only one untaught generation for the church to go into apostasy.
 7. So parents, and yes, even grandparents, ask yourselves if you're willing to do your part to stamp out Biblical illiteracy by teaching your children and grandchildren *"when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up."*
- D. There's one more way for the Lord's people to deal with the problem of Biblical illiteracy – although I've already touched on this briefly earlier.
1. Those of us who preach and teach the Word of God play a major role in stemming the tide of Biblical illiteracy. But the only way we can do that is for us to fulfill our God-given responsibilities.
 2. The apostle Paul urged Timothy: **1 Timothy 4:16** – *Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you.*
 - a. I have a responsibility to you and to myself to not only set a proper example, but to also make absolutely certain that my teaching and preaching is true to the doctrine of Christ.
 - b. The same is true for every man or woman who teaches a Bible class, and for every man who steps into this pulpit to preach a sermon.

3. This is why Paul told Timothy a few verses earlier: **2 Timothy 4:1-4** – *I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: 2 Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. 3 For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; 4 and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.*
 - a. Those who "*preach the Word*" need to be known as "men of the Book." Our responsibility is to declare God's Word – not to entertain, but to "*convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.*"
 - b. Every Bible class teacher and every man who proclaims the Word of God must base our teaching on the truth of God's Word.
 - c. And we must also be capable of defending our teaching from the Word of God – because sooner or later someone will challenge something we teach.
3. But, just as parents can't teach what they don't know – neither can Bible class teachers or preachers.

- a. This is why the apostle Paul told Timothy: **2 Timothy 2:15** –
Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.
 - b. And this is why James, the Lord's brother, warns: **James 3:1** –
My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.
4. So, if you teach a Bible class, or stand before the congregation to preach you need to ask yourself if you're willing to do your part to stamp out Biblical illiteracy by not only knowing what to teach, but also knowing how to teach it?
- a. Are you willing to put in the long hours it takes to properly prepare your class or your sermon, and then set aside the time it takes to properly prepare yourself to present it?
 - b. I have yet to meet a faithful, dedicated gospel preacher who doesn't also put in 50, 60 or even more hours a week to study, prepare, and properly present the Word of God in Bible classes and sermons.
 - c. If you're not willing to put in long hours to study and prepare Bible classes or sermons, it would be better for you to not teach or preach at all, *knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.*

CONCLUSION:

- I. I think all of us see things we can do to improve our understanding of God's divinely inspired Word.
 - A. When we think of how courageous men and women throughout history sacrificed their lives to read, study, and circulate copies of the Bible, it makes me wonder what they would think of us today.
 1. Today, we can walk into almost any major retail store and purchase a copy of the Bible – and even find a variety of translations and editions from which we can choose.
 2. And yet, there are people in other parts of world today who have to smuggle their Bibles across the borders of their countries – people who, even today, risk their own personal welfare to read, study and circulate copies of the Word of God.
 - a. I think we often forget just how blessed we really are.
 3. But, more than simply reading and meditating on God's divinely inspired Word, we also need to obey what it says by putting those wonderful teachings and principles into action.
 - B. Have you done that? Have you obeyed the Word of God by doing what it says and by applying those wonderful teachings and principles to your own life?
 1. You can't read the New Testament without discovering how and why people became followers of Jesus Christ.

- a. They believed Jesus died on the cross to redeem them from sin, they repented of this sins, and they were baptized into Christ for the remission of their sins.
2. Nor can you read the New Testament without realizing that those Christians still had struggles with sin, but they were told what they needed to do to solve that problem.
 - a. They simply needed to repent of those sins and confess them to God so that they could be cleansed once again from all unrighteousness.
3. Do you need to do either of these tonight – either come to Christ in faith, repenting of your sins and being baptized for the remission of sins; or repenting of sins you've committed as a Christian and confess those sins to God?
4. If so, then don't wait. Do it now.