

GOD'S WORD TRAINS + + +

PASTOR ZACH ZEHNDER

Well, good morning. You made it here on this cold January Sunday. Give yourselves a round of applause. I think that's pretty awesome that you're here today. I do want to let you know, fair warning, the baptism tub water is at 100 degrees, which if I hear any splashing during the service, I don't blame you. It's probably the best place to be in Omaha right now, but it is a joy to be with you to bring God's word.

If you haven't been a part of our church for years, maybe even in the last year, there's something that maybe you should probably know about me that kind of helps you understand a little bit of who I am. If we're going to take each other seriously, it's a pretty big part of my life. You know, the apostle Paul in the scripture talks about how he has a thorn in his flesh. It's like something that no matter, even though he wants to get rid of it, he can't. I wouldn't call this a thorn in the flesh, but I would call it a thorn in my family. And it is this, that I am a diehard, lifelong Cleveland Browns fan. It has generationally been passed down to me and it's frustrating, hard and sad. And as much as I try to run from it, I cannot.

The Cleveland Browns have been the worst NFL organization since 1999. We have attempted 45 different starting quarterbacks and are going into next season, not knowing who's going to be our quarterback. It's pretty sad. The best part though, is at least on, at least on Saturdays, I get to root for a great football team wrong. Like you, it's been a pretty miserable quarter century on Saturdays. My Sundays, even though I'm doing the Lord's work, aren't any better in the afternoons. Someone not long ago, bought me a coloring book called, *Why is Daddy Sad on Sundays?* It depicts the most disappointing moment in Cleveland sports, and it's pretty lengthy, which is really sad that there's been that many to color.

But we had hope once, once in the midst of those quarterbacks. It was 2018, the year prior, the Browns went 0-16, not good. Really bad actually, historically the worst. Which means you get the number one draft pick. And so we chose our quarterback of the future, his name was Baker Mayfield. Baker came onto the Browns and we had lost 19 straight when he entered into the scene. He not only turned that around, but he had one of the greatest rookie seasons, statistically historically of any quarterback. He set the rookie record for 27 NFL touchdowns that opening year, even though he didn't even play the first three games. It was like, wow, Cleveland finally got its quarterback.

But because it's Cleveland, things don't work out that nice. And over the next three years, just wildly inconsistent play from Baker that in the fourth and final year of his contract, before we could maybe extend him, Browns fans, many of them were kind of not sure about him and the Browns gave up on him, traded him for pennies on the dollar to the Carolina Panthers. And there with Matt Rhule as his head coach, I will say, he and Sam Darnold on the Carolina Panthers team, and he went from bad to worse.

Unfortunately he was cut 12 weeks in from the Carolina Panthers and it was the lowest point of his career. But thankfully the Los Angeles Rams had four quarterbacks that had been injured and they needed someone. So they brought Baker in the Tuesday he got cut to be their backup quarterback. And didn't you know that the Rams had a Thursday night game that week where in the first quarter, guess what happened to the starting quarterback? He got injured.

My wife thinks the NFL is rigged. Do you? I don't know. And so with two days to study the place, it was kind of an amazing game that they were even in it to begin with. And they were down six with two minutes to go on the two yard line. And wouldn't you know, Baker Mayfield led the Los Angeles Rams on a 98 yard game winning touchdown drive to win by one. If my memory serves me correct, they interviewed him after and they asked him how in the world did you pull this off? And he says for the last couple of days, I've just been immersed in the playbook so much so that in the post game interview, he actually officially met one of the wide receivers that caught a ball on the game winning touchdown drive. How wild is that? But he was so focused on knowing the place so that when the time came, he was the quarterback that he needed to be.

And it was the turning point of his career. He'd play a few more games with the Rams. The Buccaneers would sign him in the next year. He has a good career going for himself in Tampa. I believe he's actually gotten even closer to Jesus, by the way, in those years. And it signed a hundred million dollar contract. Most people think Baker's like a top 10, top 12 NFL quarterback. And so good for Baker. Browns fans still root for him because we don't have anything else to root for, so.

But I love this part of the story, like a football player needing to know the playbook to know how to play in the game. I want us to look at the word of God as our divine playbook, that for us to be the people God has called us to be, we've got to inhale this, know this, digest this. It's got to become who we are. And so that's my question for you today is how well do you know this playbook? We've been looking at the Bible the last four weeks, the different uses that the Bible has. And so we're going to dive into it today as being a guide to help us know what it looks like to live in this world today.

We're wrapping up our sermon series from 2 Timothy 3, verses 16 to 17, two really powerful verses that talk about the way scripture can be used. Those verses say that all scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness so that the servant of God would be thoroughly equipped for every good work. We've looked at how the Bible teaches who God is, his story, and how we fit into his story. We've looked at how the Bible rebukes, especially when we have sin in our life, that we need a sharp turn and that's only possible by the grace of God. And we looked last week at how scripture corrects. And so maybe we don't need a sharp turn, we're just a little bit off the path. But when you know the scripture and the truth, correction, even though it's hard and uncomfortable, is actually a great gift to know what is true.

But today, what does it look like to have this train us in righteousness? I want to posit before you today that salvation is not the finish line. It's the starting line. That Jesus did not die simply so you could believe something. He died so that you could become someone, a disciple. And that as amazing as the Bible is, there's two big churchy theological words that the Bible, I believe, teaches. And I think we kind of understand one and struggle with the other. It teaches both justification and sanctification. But justification leads to sanctification, right?

Justification is just a big, big word. It just means to be made righteous, to be made right. It's just as if I'd never sinned. And that happens by and through the blood of Jesus that he shed for you and that free gift of grace. Justification is not something you can do or earn on your own. It's a gift God's given to you that you get to receive. Those who have received God's gift of grace, that's meant then to lead and to well up into a life of good works so that we're equipped to do every good work. And that is the process of sanctification. It is a, the word sanctify means to be set apart, to be holy. This is the lifelong pursuit of becoming holier that we get to do in partnership with the Holy Spirit.

Justification leads to sanctification is what scripture teaches. And so my question is, is it doing that? As a church leader, one of the guys I listened to every year, he comes out with annual church trends. His name is Kerry Newhoff. And so I'm always paying attention to what are the trends that especially as church leaders, we need to be aware of. And there's seven of them he just came out with, and there's some good news and bad news in the trends.

But he said underneath all seven, there is a meta trend happening right now in America. And it is this, that America is becoming less Christian. The chart that he used in the research that he used is from Barna research that now says that half, 48% of US adults are labeled as non-practicing Christians, 24% are labeled as practicing Christians, and the other 28% then is other world religions or the nones, the N-O-N-E-S, either no God, atheist or nothing in particular.

And so if you look at this chart, what you could see is that even for those that profess a faith in Jesus, the non-practicing Christians outnumber the practicing Christians two to one. And if this is true in our city, and Barna's done research on our city to show that this is true, and we might even be a few percentage points higher in Omaha, even higher than 50%. Think about this, that one out of every two people you run into within this nation is a non-practicing Christian, which shouldn't even be a thing. I want to cry about it too, I am.

And so what are these people? They're people with head knowledge that are assenting to the belief of Jesus, but the justification is not leading to a holy life or a life pursuing Jesus. And so really when somebody says, I believe in Jesus in our nation right now, it might mean a variety of things, right? It might mean that I grew up going to church as if faith is a tradition and not your own personal relationship with God. It might mean that I prayed a prayer once as if faith is a one-time transaction instead of a lifelong transformation. For some, it might mean that I believe Jesus existed and he taught good things as if God is this moral teacher and not this resurrected King of Kings. It might mean that I turn to Jesus when I'm in trouble. He's like my spiritual 911, an optional tack on when I'm in need. Or it might mean I believe in Jesus, so I'm not going to hell. As if salvation is the finish line, not the starting line.

And when you get into the word, you simply find that this type of belief is not the belief that God invites you into. Jesus does not invite you and say, believe in me and then everything's good and we're done. The clarion call of Jesus over and over is follow me. Believing according to the Bible, believing rightly leads to following. And I genuinely believe that our generations collectively, the problem we've got to solve is somehow we've figured out how to believe in Jesus, but choose not to follow. We've got to close the gap. Those who believe in Jesus have got to start practicing their faith. And I believe that happens when we get into the word.

So today I want to talk to you about two ways in which the word works, trains us in righteousness. Number one, that it brings you all the information you need for how to follow Jesus. And number two, it also provides all the transformation you need for how to follow Jesus.

Number one, all scripture brings the information you need. Jesus closed out the greatest sermon, the Sermon on the Mount with these words in Matthew chapter seven. I've read them so many times. I'm going to do it again because they're really important until we start doing them right. I'm going to keep reading them.

Jesus says, everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose and the winds blew and beat against that house. Yet it did not fall because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose and the winds blew and beat against that house and the big bad wolf tried to blow it down, yet it, and it did, it fell with a great crash.

Jesus would say it even more plainly in Luke 11, 28, blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it. And James, the brother of Jesus would even be even more blunt when he said, don't merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says, do what it says.

So after going to college, I then spent lots of dollars and lots of years of my life studying at cemetery, sorry, I mean, seminary slip there, sorry about that. And I came up with this conclusion after my seminary studies that the best way to follow Jesus is to follow Jesus. Aren't you really proud of me? I was a son of this congregation. You actually gave me a scholarship every year and that's what I got you. You're welcome by the way. Thank you. I should say actually for that scholarship.

My point is for as much new things and as easy as it is to share new information about what to do and how to live in this world, the greatest answer for how to follow Jesus is be hearers and doers, readers and practitioners of his word. We don't need to reinvent discipleship. We don't need to figure out how do we do this. We just got to get better at doing what Jesus said.

It's in here. This is our playbook. This is where we, where we learn how to follow Jesus. It's meant to be learned and practiced. And every analogy breaks down at some point because, you know, a football quarterback going through a playbook, that's meant to be informational. It's not really meant to be inspirational or transformational unlike the word of God, which is, but when you look at a playbook, if you're a quarterback, you want to understand the plays to know what things ought to look like. And so you look at X's and O's and lines and squiggles, and you kind of understand. So this is how the play ought to work, but, but you don't perfect plays in a playbook on paper. You perfect them when in practice, in training.

And so I want to put that before you today, similarly, that, that in, when it comes to following Jesus, we don't perfect, you know, how we live in this world by, by just reading it alone and keeping it kind of in here, in our head, we, we perfect it by practicing it and by, by putting habits in our life, by, by training. In other words, you're not going to be a greater disciple of Jesus by just trying harder. It's not about trying, it's about training.

And I love the way Dallas Willard says it, that grace is not opposed to effort. It's opposed to earning, right? We don't, we don't earn grace. That's a free gift given to us, but just because it's a free gift doesn't mean we don't do things after that. And we do, we train, we put ourselves in habits that Jesus invites us into because training builds muscle memory, makes us stronger.

I like the way that Eugene Peterson talks about discipleship. He phrases it like this. He says that it's a long, consistent obedience in the same direction, right? Because if you think about, this is why sometimes habits are harder than just try, try harder. Habits are harder because when you try harder, you might actually get instantaneous results. And when you put habits in your life, you don't see instantaneous results.

A lot of you that made that resolution to get back in the gym this year, how's that going for you? A lot of you wanted to get back in the gym and after one day of doing a few crunches, you wanted an ab to pop and it didn't happen. They're still hidden underneath. Maybe you don't see the transformation overnight, but the transformation's there.

You don't see how much you grow physically unless you go to family reunions and you're a teenager and you don't see those people for two years. But then the moment they see you, they get all crazy. Your aunts and uncles and grandparents, don't they? They're like, oh my goodness, how much you've grown, stand back to back, let's measure. Because you've grown. It's hard to see overnight, but habits are the key.

John Ortberg, I love the way he says it, that habits eat willpower for breakfast. That's good. We got to have habits in our life and all scripture brings the information we need to know what habits are important.

Number two, though, and this is again where the playbook analogy drops out and this gets even better, is that all scripture provides the transformation you need. Just by getting in the habit of reading this book, you become a transformed person. Did you know that? It's awesome. It's not only what the word says, I'll show you that in just a moment, but the data backs it up.

In fact, the American Bible Society has studied people over the last couple of decades in America and they've found a statistical, a big change in the analytics that for those, they call it the power of four, that read the Bible four times a week or more, that they experience a much higher level of human flourishing because all of these things become true.

That people that read the Bible four times a week or more get these things, more happiness and life satisfaction. Anybody want that? How about less stress? You want that more hope, more purpose, greater meaning, greater character, better relationships simply by reading this book. How wild is this?

The Browns are one of the most analytics driven team in the national football league. I want to say, Hey, have you checked these analytics out? Maybe just spend 10 minutes reading the Bible before you practice. Maybe that'll help. I don't know. Maybe I should call in. I'm not sure. Anything can help at this point, right? They don't even have a coach right now because he got fired. But right.

Wouldn't you want teammates though? And not just football teammates, but we're on the same team. If we're going to be on the same team together, don't you want teammates that are happier and more

satisfied in life that aren't carrying as much stress that have hope for the future that have purpose and meaning and know the role that they're called to play on the team that have greater character, which means we're going to have greater chemistry and are in better relationships with one another.

The Bible just by reading, it gives you that crazy power of four. And so if one of the purposes is to equip you for good works, you're going to be a lot more equipped for good works. If that, if that describes you, because when we read the word, it's not only we that read it, it reads us. It changes us.

Martin Luther once said it this way, that the Bible is alive. It speaks to me. It has feet. It runs after me. It has hands. It lays hold of me. The author of Hebrews would say it in this way for the word of God is alive and active, sharper than any double edged sword. It penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit joints and marrow. It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

This is what reading the Bible does. It changes you and me from the inside out. And so I have to, my best guess on how in the world we've come up with this thing called a non-practicing Christian and how it's become a majority in our nation. Because I know this works. My guess is that we're not reading it and we are not in the word and we are not letting it train us in righteousness. And we all need it. I need it.

There was a day last year that was supposed to be a really fun day for me and ended up being a really hard day. I'm not going to get into too many details with you. I might share a little more of it at a later time, but I'll just say that I felt overlooked and unseen in a crowd of people that genuinely loved me and cared for me and I did the same for them.

And so it just felt weird that I was having all of these feelings and I was feeling insecure on that day. And instead of me turning to God and Scripture and reminding myself of who I am and who God calls me, I turned inward and I just kind of like tried my hardest. I wanted to feel noticed. I wanted to be seen and I wanted to matter.

And so I compromised who I was, who I'm called to be. And I let myself go too far, not out of rebellion, but out of insecurity. And I woke up the next day just kind of physically exhausted, but spiritually filled with a lot of shame. A lot of questions about, Zach, where, where is your heart right now?

And how in the world, how, why, why do you allow other people to make you feel insecure? Don't you know how much I love you and how much I've called you and yet you failed? You failed for that? You fell for that? It was a really sobering reminder of as much as I can be in the game, I still need God's grace in my life.

And if you've ever had a bad day or made bad decisions or had a bad month or a bad season, if you've ever felt like, I don't know if I should, if I'm even in the game or if God wants me back in the game, trust that He does. Because every time that we meet God in this word, here's what happens. He meets you there and He not only meets you at your lowest point, He takes your worst and He gives you His best.

He does it first to, to right what is wrong, but second, to remind you that you're still a disciple and you're still in the game. Words that I love that speak so much to you and to me are 1 John 1, 8 and 9, and this is what I needed on that day when I woke up.

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, He's faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

That God has a desire to right your wrongs, to meet you in your mess, to give you His gift of grace over and over and over again, to purify you. And do you see the last word? To purify you from all of your unrighteousness.

This is how we get trained in righteousness. We let ours go and we receive His, and this is what's contained in here so that you and I can be the disciples, the followers, the practicing Christians He's called us to be.

A couple of weeks ago, I shared the story in the week where the Bible rebukes about how Jesus rebuked even a couple of disciples that He really loved, James and John. Do you remember the story? They went into a village, and in that village, the villagers did not greet James and John and Jesus the way that James and John thought they were worthy of being greeted.

And talk about overreaction. They said to Jesus, Hey, Jesus, they didn't greet us the way, they didn't say hi the way we wanted them to. Their body language and tone was off, Jesus. So, they said, Jesus, do you want us to call down fire and thunder and destroy the whole city? Talk about overreaction. Jesus clearly rebuked their attitude.

But here's what I didn't notice until I was listening to an unrelated podcast about this exact story, is that it's not years later, it's not months later, it's not chapters later, it's a couple of verses later. After Jesus rebukes James and John, do you know what He does?

He sends out not only those two, but the 12 and 72 others to go be His representatives in the world. And I'm like, Jesus, I don't know that I would have done that. I think those two need a time out. Let's put them through some mental health stuff with a therapist. Let's make sure that as they go out, they're representing you in the right way. And yet Jesus doesn't keep them on the sidelines because your job is not to be on the sidelines. He calls you to believe and to get in the game and follow.

And this trains you in righteousness because every time you open it, God meets you here. It's got the information for what to do and for how to follow Jesus. And it's got grace and forgiveness because God meets you in His word. You believe this?

So you got to work the word because the word works. Work the word because the word works. It works backwards. The word works. So work the word. The word works. So work the word. It works as a rap song. You got to work the word because the word works. You got to work the word because the word works. Okay, maybe it doesn't work as a rap song, at least for me. I'll let my friend Flame go with that and see if he wants to put it into a song. Work the word because this word works.

And again, the only rationale I can come up with for how we have believers but not practicing Christians is we're not working the word. We're not reading the word. And it's resulting in a really pathetic, confusing, half-hearted, shadow, broken down, mediocre representation of Jesus. And He is worth far more than what we collectively have given Him. Do you agree with that?

And yet the representation He's going to get from us is, it's not perfect. But you are called to be a disciple of Jesus. And so I just want to encourage you with this question. Are you just believing or are you following? When you say you believe in Jesus, what does that mean?

If your belief in Jesus means anything but, I believe in Jesus and I am pursuing Him to be a great disciple. If your belief in Jesus does not result in that, then friends, that is not the type of belief the Bible talks about. And it needs to be repented of, thrown down at the cross, thrown down like all the other sin that you've brought. And you need the word to work and to give you grace so you can do it all over again, because He's worthy of our best.

And this is why I love Sundays like this, because it's, did you hear it's Baptism Sunday today? Come on, give it up. We got 19 people getting baptized across our three campuses, our seven services. Baptism is really God's way of saying you are in the game, right?

How do we know that it's God's way of saying you're in the game? Because well, the water, the water works with the word. The word is what works. The word, which is this water is about forgiveness. It's about new life. It's about being cleansed. It's about being welcomed into a family of God. It's about filling you with the Holy Spirit.

When the word is attached to the water, the word works and does a miracle in that person's life. And we're about to see some of that here today. It's God's way of saying you are forgiven. You are clean. You are mine and you are in the game.

There's also today another nine people across our campuses remembering their baptism. Can we give it up for those people today? And some aren't as familiar with the practice of remembering our baptism. Why do we need to remember our baptism?

Baptism is the gift God gives to us and God does it right. And I'm a hundred percent God's word works and the water works. And so, so God didn't do anything wrong the first time, right? But you know what happens? We mess up.

And what I've seen in churches, again, the problem in the Western church is, is, is it's not actually a problem too much is like, we love the justification part. That's a beautiful thing. But you know what we struggle to do? We struggle to celebrate sanctification. We struggle to mark progress in our spiritual lives. And I really believe that's what remembering baptism is, is somebody saying, you know what? I was baptized and God did do his work, but I ran away. And today is the day that I'm coming back and I'm saying, I am not just a believer, but I am a follower of Jesus.

I am called, I am chosen, and I've been out of the game and it's time to get back in the game. And so if baptism is getting in the game, remembering of baptism is getting back in the game. And I love that.

One of the ways we're going to do that differently here today is because it's scriptural, it's, it's historical. It's what the church has done over the years is rather than using water for that, we're going to be using anointing oil today. That's what prophets and elders and pastors over the centuries have used to, to mark a moment to, to help someone not only remember that they're still a chosen, still a child of God, but they are chosen, they are called and they are anointed.

And so it's an honor to celebrate and see God at work today. But what does this mean for you? What does it mean for you? Will you bow your head and close your eyes with me as we pray to this God?

God, your word works. Thank you for the grace we receive in it and from it. But Lord, we, all of us today need to come before you and say, Lord, we're sorry. We've made mistakes and committed some errors, made bad decisions, forgotten who we are. Let our baptismal identity go away.

And your word says that when we confess our sin, you're faithful and just. So I'd love for you to now just in your own heart, bring that sin to God and ask him, confess your sin and ask him for his forgiveness. Just take a moment.

If we confess our sin, God is faithful and just and will purify us from all unrighteousness. And so, God, we've confessed and we believe your word works. And so we trust in the promise that you have taken our unrighteousness away and purified us and made us right again.

And so for any of you that came in with sins that you've not been able to get past and for any of you who've struggled to walk in your baptismal identity that God has given to you by confessing your sins, hear the words of God to you right now that you have been forgiven in the name of the Father, by the blood of the Son and through the power of the Holy Spirit. You are my child. You are chosen. You are anointed. You have a place in the game.

So get back in the game. It's in God's name we pray and together the church says, Amen.