

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: September 24, 2017  
Sermon Title: The Good Book, The Good News,  
The Good People  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: 2 Timothy 3:14-27

## **2 Timothy 3:14-27**

*But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.*

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A brief word to explain today's sermon: It's actually less of a lesson and more of a talk about the importance of the Bible. I don't have time to go into all the importance of the Bible; we do that all year long. The truth is there's plenty in the Bible that makes our heads spin, sometimes to the right, sometimes to the left. There are verses in one part of the Bible that get countermanded in another part. There are verses we've moved on from or just plain don't like anymore.

I made the decision to read the Bible through the prism, the filter, the life of Jesus. You'd be amazed and pleased how that simplifies and clarifies. But all that is for another day. Today, I'm just trying to convince you to have a Bible and use it. An easy way to get into the Bible is to do our weekly email Bible study, probably three minutes beginning to end. Or, come to our Bible Study. It's really not scary. And one more thing, I think everybody here has my book *Church* at home. Read the sixth chapter on Scripture ("All Scripture is Profitable: My Love Affair with the Bible"). It's everything we believe and teach about the Bible.

We are all biased by our experiences. If you first fell in love on a beach in Maine, you're forever biased toward Maine. If the first sporting event you attended as a kid was at Yankee Stadium, you're forever a Yankees fan. If

the first book you read, staying up all night reading under the covers with a flashlight, was *Harry Potter*, you're forever biased toward Harry Potter and wizardry. Me, I'm biased toward the Bible.

I'm going to tell you a story I tell about every two years, that's in at least two of my books, about my conversion. I'll give you the brief cleaned-up version. After spending my teenage years in rebellion, sloth, and oblivion, I was kicked out of college. I ended up, of all things, working for the New York Bible Society. My job was to organize people to give away free Bibles all over New York City. For one two-week period, I worked by myself on the Coney Island Boardwalk. People would get off the subway, walk up to the boardwalk headed for the beach, and there I would be, putting a free Bible in their hands. No speech, no message. Just a free Bible.

What changed my life forever was the response: some people spat at me, a few punched me, some went to the nearest garbage can and tossed it away. Most ignored me. And yet, some took a Bible, went to the beach, and came back hours later, hugged me, kissed me, threw money at me. Pretty soon I started thinking I needed to get to know this book better! I mean, here's a book, I give it to people, and complete strangers hate me for it, hit me, spit at me; and other strangers love me for it. There has to be something in that book that I'd forgotten since my childhood.

Our Church is probably 40 percent Protestant, 40 percent Catholic, 20 percent a little bit of other traditions, including folks with no religious background. So when I get nostalgic, I often remember something that was not everyone's experience.

I'm a product of the 1950s Protestant Northeast Mainstream Christianity. That meant Sunday School at 9:30, worship at 11. And the foundation of it all was the Holy Bible, the Scriptures, the Word of God, the Good Book. Sunday School back then consisted of about four things:

No. 1. Memorization. Grade by grade we grew up memorizing sections of Scripture: an easy one in first grade, then each year getting longer and more complex. And then, on Children's Sunday in June, as big a day as Easter, each class stood up on the altar, facing the congregation, and recited their verses. It was like "American Idol" with the Bible.

No. 2. Flannel graphs. Anyone remember those? Gigantic pieces of flannel put up on a board, and the teacher would tell Bible stories, acting out the story by placing cutouts like paper dolls made of felt that stuck to the flannel graph and got moved around or added to as the story of the Bible progressed.

No. 3. Filmstrip projector: It was like moving pictures before they moved or a slideshow all strung together. One Bible scene at a time projected on a screen made us feel as if we were back in Bible times. I know you are thinking I'm older than dirt, but in 1954 or so, this was all pretty high-tech stuff, bringing the Bible alive.

No. 4. Comic book Bibles. Nowadays, if you want superheroes and Marvel characters, you go to the movies for the latest Hollywood spectacular about Spiderman, Batman, Wonder Woman, or the X-Men. In my day, you went to the corner candy store, put 10 cents on the counter, and bought the latest comic book. We bought them, traded them, treasured them. So when all of a sudden, our Sunday School started handing out comic book Bible stories, we knew we were the coolest Church in the world! And we read them, we traded them, we treasured them.

In other words, by whatever means necessary, we got to know the Bible. And we weren't some crazy Fundamentalist Church. One of my Sunday School teachers was a member of the Rockettes, and the other was a roller derby queen! My father, the pastor, marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. We were keen on justice and peace and equality and feeding the poor before it was popular. But, by golly, the Bible was front and center of it all. In thought, word, in deed. In song. In preaching.

Lots of things got me thinking about this for today. First, obviously, was giving out Bibles to our third-graders. That's like a rite of passage in our Church. We give each child their own Bible. Their own personal encyclopedia of Judeo-Christian religion. Their own "Word of God." And every Sunday that they come to Sunday School we want them to bring it, crack it open, use it. Get in the habit.

Second is the fact that the Bible is not that much of a habit anymore. I remember when Bill Clinton was president, he was photographed carrying a big Bible into Church, and he was mocked mercilessly. "Charlatan," "show-boater, wearing religion on his sleeve," "hypocrite." Folks didn't realize in some Churches in some parts of the country, on Sunday you pick up your Bible and carry it into Church. That's what's done.

During the week, you pick up your lunch pail, your briefcase, you go to work. On Saturday, you pick up your fishing rod, you go to the lake. On Sunday, you pick up your Bible, you go to Church. The Bible is not in our habit as much anymore. It's out of fashion, it's out of sight, out of mind, it's lost its place. It's lost its influence.

My goal today is to approach this dilemma from two ends, a pincer attack on Biblical apathy, childhood on one end, adulthood on the other. The adulthood

end is easy. I wonder how many people even have “Family Bible” anymore. You know what I mean: a big old fat, heavy Bible, passed on from generation to generation, the front page listing the family tree going way back, an heirloom almost too precious to use. Which is part of the problem: *too* precious. People used to have them, but never used them. You couldn’t give it to a child under 10, it would crush them! Anybody over 65 couldn’t lift it. So folks would think, “Yeah, we’ve got a Bible, it’s around here somewhere. (I’ve actually had this conversation with people). “Let’s see, here’s Grandma’s china and Great-grandma’s linens, Mom’s “Hope Chest” . . . Oh, here it is, the Family Bible. Ooof! That’s heavy!”

So I’m thinking of an approach a little more workable. I’d like to see every family in our Church with a user-friendly, attractive, easy-to-read, first-class Bible. Right now, I’m working on a plan to have a bunch for sale or to order to make it easy. I probably sold 6,000 copies of my own books right here at the Church—6,000! I ought to be able to sell 50 or hundred Bibles.

Alida’s book chat group sells out their books every month. This month we’ve been selling James Blake’s inspiring book about other great athletes who took a stand (*Ways of Grace: Stories of Activism, Adversity, and How Sports Can Bring Us Together*). If we can sell 100 or 200 other people’s books every year, we ought to be able to convince 100 people to buy a Bible. Why? To have it handy. To have it out. To have it.

Now, I understand for most everybody in Church today, you’ve long since passed me by. You’re high-tech, social media savvy, plugged-in, in the cloud; with iPhones and iPads, everything in the world increasingly instantly available, including the Bible. I get it.

You can Google any word, any topic, add the word Bible to it, and you’re all set. But there’s something to be said for having a *thing*, a *whole thing*, right there in front of you, out in the open, as convenient and ready to use as your salt and pepper shaker, your coffeemaker, and yes, your computer. Look at it like lots of other things in your house. You don’t need photographs in your house anymore; you can have them all on your iPhone. You don’t need artwork in your house. It’s all available on the 2-inch screen on your iPhone. And, heck, you don’t need food in your house anymore! With all the restaurants in Fairfield County, you could eat out every meal, every day for a year, and never go to the same place twice.

But sometimes it feels good to sit down in your own home and eat your own dinner cooked in your own kitchen. And it feels good to look on the wall and see family photos of loved ones gone by and memories still precious, as permanent and prominent in your home, as the greatest treasure. And it feels

good to see a beautiful painting in a nice frame hanging in the perfect spot to catch your eye just when you need a boost. There for all to see.

Yes I'm suggesting a usable, accessible, understandable, physical Bible, right there on the coffee table or in a nearly bookcase at eye level, or next to your bed, or in the family room, can be a big help. That's all our Scripture lesson for today was trying to say.

St. Paul was writing to his friend Timothy, and he offers a commentary on Scripture. Paul says, "All Scripture is profitable, inspired, God-breathed; useful for teaching, rebuke, correction, training. *All* Scripture is profitable for teaching . . . rebuke . . . correction . . . training, so that we will be thoroughly equipped, *thoroughly equipped.*" Ready for whatever the world throws at us.

I've been talking about the adult end of knowing the Bible. Let me say a brief word about the child end. The simple fact is there is no substitute for Sunday School. That's our one chance a week, 40 weeks a year, 50 minutes a week, to instill a little Bible knowledge, the basics, in a way that will give every child some confidence in their faith, something to build on, to grow on.

I think everyone here would agree our young people are headed out into a tough world—complicated, uncertain. So we all try to give them the best foundation possible to be equipped and ready.

I once took a high school group to Harvard, thinking I'd get them inspired about college. Ahead of time I'd arranged for two Harvard students from the Christian Fellowship on campus to speak to my group. So when we got together, sitting on the grass in Harvard Yard, I asked the Harvard students what my young people should do to prepare for college. I figured they'd say take SAT-prep courses, take AP classes, do a lot of extracurriculars. Nope. They said, "Know your Bible. *Know your Bible.* By the time you get to college, it will be too late."

If you were in Church last Sunday when our ASP volunteers talked about their experiences in Appalachia, you'll remember Severin Tormey. He talked about the project his work crew had for the week, tearing up an old rotting, unsafe floor. At the end of his mini-sermon, Severin said, "In the beginning of ASP, Alida said, 'Expect miracles.' I discounted what she said. I didn't know if I was going to see a miracle or not. I did, though. I saw how happy the family was to have a floor to walk on . . . That was a miracle."

"A floor to walk on—a miracle." That's what we try to do with our Sunday School, to provide our children with "a floor to walk on." Something solid, something that can handle life's traffic.

May I bring up Alida for a moment? She won't do it herself, so let me. Last Sunday afternoon, there were 39 kids at our sixth- and seventh-grade youth group, the largest ever—39, enough to make any adult sweat. On Thursday there were 140 teenagers in the Len Morgan Youth Barn for SPF. *Did you hear me?* Can you even imagine that? And it was a school holiday! One hundred forty teenagers chose to be on top of this hill, connected to this Church. All this, on top of 300 going to Appalachia this summer. All this points to an even greater urgency: if we're going to have 40 middle-schoolers, 140 high-schoolers, 300 ASP-ers, all that traffic had better have a *solid* floor to walk on.

That's our Sunday School. Earlier today, you heard from our team of young women, the "Rooms for Roots" group. Each year they make this monumental effort to touch one girl's life, to bring an unexpected blessing to a total stranger in need.

All over this Church, young and old, people are making sure there's a "solid floor" underneath folks whose lives are perilous. The Bible is our manual, our textbook, our floor plan for everything we do. Let's be sure to use it.

Our final hymn today is really an old, old Gospel hymn about the Bible, No. 323, "Wonderful Words of Life":

*Sing them over again to me,  
wonderful words of life;  
let me more of their beauty see,  
wonderful words of life;  
words of life and beauty,  
teach me faith and duty:*

*Refrain:  
Beautiful words, wonderful words,  
wonderful words of life;  
Beautiful words, wonderful words,  
wonderful words of life.*

*Christ, the blessed One, gives to all  
wonderful words of life;  
sinner, list to the laving call,  
wonderful words of life;  
all so freely given,  
wooing us to heaven: [Refrain]*

*Sweetly echo the gospel call,  
wonderful words of life;  
offer pardon and peace to all,  
wonderful words of life;  
Jesus, only Savior,  
sanctify forever, [Refrain]*