

## **“Point Of Reference”**

### **2 Timothy 3:14-17 - 18:1-5**

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.

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.

For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.

As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

## **Point Of Reference**

2 Timothy 3:14-17 - 18:1-5

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### **I.**

There are any number of ways we could have gone with today's sermon, as life is replete with examples which epitomize the importance of, and need for, having an appropriate point of reference. However, the one I have selected turns out to be particularly poignant, for me, at least; and, hopefully, you as well. It began this August with a call to my cell phone which showed up as originating from a number in Atlanta Georgia; to be clear, I don't *know* anyone who lives in Atlanta Georgia.

I, of course, assumed it to be someone trying to sell me *something* or solicit my vote for *someone*. Though my disposition varies from cordial to outright hostile depending on the circumstances of my life in the moment the call is received, I usually always answer these calls, if only to, then, block the number. I'm never sure if this will really help, but at least it makes me feel like I doing something about it.

### **II.**

Turns out, though, I *do* know someone from Atlanta Georgia, but he is actually from Ethiopia: a young man by the name of Anamo Kisho. Anamo is a senior at St. Lawrence University, and one of the several international students Linda and I invited to the manse last year to share Thanksgiving dinner. Anamo is a classmate with Janeil (who was also at the Thanksgiving dinner) my Jamaican friend and proud alumnus of the Rev. Mike school of driving. It seems that Anamo's call to me was a direct result of Janeil throwing me under the bus. When he expressed to her a great desire to also obtain *his* U.S. driver's license, she encouraged him to ask me to teach him and gave him my cell phone number. After hesitating for many months fearing I would refuse his request, he finally worked up enough courage to give me a call and ask. Though I've repeatedly stated that Cameron will be my *last* student, I did relent and offer to teach him; this past Tuesday we had our first lesson.

### III.

At this point, I must confess to you, a bit of a “male bias.” Part of my rationale/excuse in taking him on was a certain hope that he would, perhaps, have a bit more driving experience under his belt and only require some polish and to use my car to take the road test. As I do with all my driving students I took him to a parking lot to begin, had him get in the driver’s seat, start the car and, then, I started to explain to him most of the things that seasoned drivers take for granted: the role of the battery in starting the car, the alternator which recharges the battery, fresh air in the winter to defrost the windshield, recirculated air in the summer for the AC, rear defogger, positioning the mirrors/seat, what the numbers “2” and “1” mean on the shift selector (i.e., don’t use them), pressing the button to move the shifter, rear defroster, high and low beams, turn signals and the importance of having his Learner’s Permit and ID with him in the car. I even explained the difference between disk brakes and (rear) drum brakes. Finally, after about 20 minutes of this I said, “Ok, take us around the parking lot.” To which he replied, “Which one is the brake?” Now *that* is what you would call a point of reference.

### IV.

A point of reference is something one uses to determine, gauge or understand something else. A point of reference serves to set us straight, chart a course, orient us, and to determine the truth of one’s situation or our place in the world. A point of reference may be uniquely our own, that is to say, subjective, arising from one’s particular experience, education or, even, opinion; and may be something upon which reasonable people would *disagree*. Like what constitutes art. More often, though, a point of reference is something which is shared, that is to say, objective, arising from observation, verification or common sense. Like the scientific method. Something upon which reasonable people would *agree* (well, most people anyway).

### V.

Whereas I had hoped for a short course of study for my new driving student, the need to identify the brake pedal gave me a point of reference which revealed the truth of my situation: that Anamo and I would be spending a *great* deal of time together over the next several months.

Today's Scripture reading from 2 Timothy is a reminder of the primary point of reference that we share as followers of Christ, and its value to us. That "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." While Paul was clearly referring to the Old Testament (Hebrew Scriptures) as the second letter to Timothy was written in either 64 or 65 C.E., well before such a thing as the New Testament was compiled or even written, we understand and accept that the Bible, and the Good News contained within it, serves as the most important point of reference for our lives.

## **VI.**

I remember one time, years ago, a faculty member from a local college who is wholly unrelated to the church, came to my office for counseling; someone with whom I had become friends and who is no longer living in the area. This is an incredibly bright person, whom I very much enjoyed and respected. This person was in crisis owing to a life change which had been thrust upon them with utterly devastating effect. Though I listened and offered compassion, it eventually became evident to me that I could offer not even one iota of hope or comfort to the person; though I greatly desired to do so. We simply were operating from two very different points of reference: I believed in the existence of God, the other person did not.

While I am well-acquainted with the very valid scientific and philosophical arguments against the existence of God, I simply choose, instead, to believe. Though I certainly found no fault in this person for *not* believing, when the chips were down the person had nothing, and I meaning *nothing*, with which to find meaning or purpose in life; he had no point of reference.

## **VII.**

Such a situation as the one I have just described is actually quite rare, at least in my experience. Typically, people do not give such great thought and consideration to the existence of God, or how such an existence might be made manifest in the world, in general, or their own lives, in specific. To be honest, I actually have to admire such a rational and well-reasoned point of reference. In fact, I've been down such a road myself. Upon reaching the end of it, however, I made the decision to accept a very different point of reference based on the exact same information.

A much more common situation, however, is what Paul addresses in today's reading. Here, people's points of reference are being diluted or corrupted, often out of their own desire or action: "For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths."

## **VIII.**

As evidenced by today's political climate and social environment, truer words were never spoken. I believe, though, that you recognize and understand all of this so we are going to side-step that particular rabbit-hole here this morning and pursue ideas which are less banal and more germane to us as people of faith.

Returning to this week's driving lesson, one of the things I always incorporate into my driving school curriculum is the difference between passing the test and actually learning to drive. If you learn to drive, you'll pass the test. Just passing the test doesn't necessarily mean you know how to drive, however. Though in no way inappropriate or unexpected, most student drivers come to the task with a common objective: to pass the road test and obtain their license. We live in a goal-oriented world where achievement is valued above all else, with too much to do and too little time to do it. We've all had to learn to be efficient, practical and constantly gauge our progress.

## **IX.**

However, as I explained to Anamo, you cannot "cram" experience. Passing a road test is fairly simple: learn to start, stop, parallel park perform a 3 point turn and don't hit anything. Learning to drive, though, takes experience and experience takes time. Many new drivers, especially the international students, try to intellectualize the process. Meaning, if I could only explain it well enough they could then do it. Instead, what I tell them is that if they do it long enough and often enough they won't need my explanation. I also took Cameron out driving this week, and I told him as much as well: he needs to do the same thing, in the same way, over and over again so that it becomes a matter of "muscle memory." The goal is not to have the brain tell the body what to do, instead, just teach the body what to do and not only will the brain follow, the brain will then be freed up to become alert and more aware of what is going on all around it.

## **X.**

I think a great many churches, and pastors, use the point of reference that is the Bible merely to pass the test. What I want us to do, is use the Bible as a point of reference to learn to drive. I'm sure when I started the sermon, many of you said to yourselves, "Mike, you idiot, why did you offer to teach yet another person to drive?"; or words to that effect. I completely agree with you, I have *more* than enough to do without spending 30 or 40 hours teaching a young person from Ethiopia how to drive. To tell you the truth, talking to him on the phone that day, I really didn't even think about it. Though I "knew" I was stepping off a cliff (just how high, admittedly, I did not realize) my brain did not enter into the equation. Akin to muscle-memory, it was *spirit-memory*. This is simply what you do, you *help* people; especially a stranger in a strange land. Why? Because the *Bible* tells us so.

## **XI.**

While we pass the test by *knowing* the right thing to do, the Christ-like thing to do, learning drive, learning to actually *live* out our faith with the *Bible* as our point of reference, is doing the same right thing, in the same compassionate way, over and over again. While we may pass the "test" by *belonging* to a church, learning to *be* the church takes experience and experience takes time. Time that is measured in each Sunday's with worship, each week in the people we help, every fall during our Stewardship drive, and all throughout the year in the lives we change and the fun we have. It isn't that we don't think about our faith, we do; we've just moving beyond the *thinking* phase to the *doing* phase.

## **XII.**

This morning, the Apostle Paul urges us to avail ourselves of the point of reference that is scripture, and the Good News it contains: to proclaim the message; to be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; to convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. Just like having the patience and persistence to teach someone to drive, even when they begin with having to learn which is the brake pedal and which is the gas. My grandmother would always say, you usually only ever get one or two moments in life to truly help someone, and it usually comes at the most inconvenient time.

Today I would urge us to avail ourselves of scripture as our point of reference not just in the big decisions we face, but also in the simple and everyday moments of our own life; even, and especially, in the face of having too much to do and too little time to do it.

### **XIII.**

Along with the very many others we set for ourselves, let our highest goal be to orient ourselves to God so that we might chart a course which will determine the truth of our own life, and our place in the world. If we want to do more than simply *pass* the test, if we want to actually learn to *live* out our faith, we have to choose empathy over efficiency, and opt for piety over practicality. We will gauge our progress not by what we achieve in *our* lives, but by how we touch and change the lives of *others*. We may never be sure if what we do really helps, but we will most assuredly feel as if we are doing something *in* this world, *about* this world, and on behalf of Christ who is our point of reference. Amen.