

Discipleship 202: Typing Class
By Jason Huff
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Today's final Scripture reading comes from Matthew 16:13-17. Listen now to God's Word. "When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven."

My mom has proven to have been right about many things, but probably none so much as typing class. Going into high school, my mom insisted I take typing. I didn't think I'd need it. I'd been working on computers for years and had perfected the art of "hunt and peck" to a science. There was probably no class I went into with less interest and more boredom. I'm not even going to say that I enjoyed the class in the way I enjoyed, say, journalism or literature. But of all my classes, that was probably the single most useful one I ever took. I use the skills I got out of there every single day of my life. I can't imagine what my life would be like without being able to type properly or how long it would take me to get my thoughts out. I would have never chosen it, but having taken it has made a huge difference.

When many of us think of the word theology, we react in the same way I did to typing class. We don't think we need much of it. We know enough to feel secure, perhaps, that we are saved in Jesus Christ. We believe in Him for salvation and want to follow Him faithfully. We've seen people fight over unimportant details of religion before, and that's not us. We know enough, we believe, to get by. If questions or problems of faith come up, we'll go see the expert.

But theology is far more than a dry study of facts or concepts about God. It's at the very center of our being. Every human being throughout the centuries has been a theologian. There's no getting away from theology. Just like virtually everyone in the modern world has to use a keyboard, every person has a theology, whether they realize it or not. And what our theology is makes a difference not only in eternity but also right here, right now, every day. We need to not only love and honor and worship our God, we need to know and understand our God through what He has revealed of Himself to us.

But what exactly is theology? According to the dictionary, it's the study of religious questions, such as the nature of God, sin, and salvation. Theology is the way we process the big mysteries of life: is there a God? Can we know Him? What is He like? If He exists, why do things happen the way they do? Is He pleased with us or displeased? What dealings does He have with our world? Does He want to be in relationship with us? Those are all theology.

The Bible is God's revelation of Himself to us. That makes the Bible a theological book. But it isn't just a book of answers. It's primarily a historical book. Scripture teaches us that God has participated in history and still does. God reveals Himself not primarily through answering our questions but by being in relationship with us. His actions and words reveal His nature.

And throughout Scripture, we see the people of God diligently working to understand Him, and to understand what a proper response to God might be. Our psalm this morning, Psalm 8, is absolutely beautiful. It talks about the majesty of God, how God set the heavens in place, and yet His glory is far more magnificent than what the heavens can contain. Then David pauses. With all this amazing stuff God has put into place, who am I? Who are we, as human beings? David says God has crowned us with glory and honor, made just a little lower than the angels. God has made us to rule over the works of His hands. And David ends the psalm as he began it, praising God's majesty.

Here's the kicker, here's the theology – David looked at what he knew of God from nature and realized God's utter majesty. Then he looked at us and realized, we're the same kind of handiwork as the stars and the heavens...even better, really! A majestic God has crowned us, who seem tiny and insignificant in comparison to the creation, He has crowned us with glory and honor and made us rulers over that creation! David's theology of God led him to realize something amazing about us, and about himself.

The psalms were for a very long time the songs of the church. They teach theology in memorable ways. They show us what it means to approach God when we are glad and when we are angry, when we are sad and depressed, when we are oppressed and hurting, and even when we sin. They don't contain the full portrait of God that He revealed in Jesus Christ, but the psalms are the theology of the people of Israel in poetry and action.

Jesus too was a theologian. Now as the Son of the Father, as God Himself, He obviously didn't have to study or think about Himself. But we're told repeatedly that Jesus does not do His own will; He only does what He sees the Father doing. In His earthly life, Jesus submitted completely to His Father. That was His choice and desire. But He also taught His followers theology – He taught them about the Father, about Himself, and about the Holy Spirit.

In our passage from Matthew, we see Jesus asking His disciples to reflect theologically. Who do people say I am, Jesus asks. Who do *you* say I am? The disciples all chime in about what everybody else thinks, but there's a sense of reticence about what they think. Finally Simon Peter, the guy who's always the first to talk rather than think, comes up with the answer – “you're the Christ, the promised one, the Son of the Living God.” And Jesus calls Simon blessed because the answer he gave didn't come from himself, but from God the Father.

Now Jesus' question was a strange one. Who do people say I am? The Jews of His era were expecting a great prophet from history to usher in the era of the promised Messiah, but their guesses were totally off. They even thought that somehow John the Baptist, who had died not a few months prior, had come back as Jesus, though they had both been alive at the same time. The Jews didn't believe in reincarnation, so how could Jesus be a prophet long gone? There was immense confusion. Today, people don't think Jesus was Elijah come back from the dead. But they might think He was a great moral teacher. They might think He was a friend to the poor and oppressed. They might think He was nothing at all, a wacko revolutionary whose disciples started telling crazy stories about Him after His death. But many still don't come up with the answer that Simon Peter gave. Simon Peter reflected on all he'd seen and heard, and God led him to the truth – Jesus was indeed the long-awaited redeemer of Israel and the whole world.

Jesus asked His disciples to reflect theologically, and the authors of the New Testament prove they took that lesson to heart. The books of Romans and Hebrews are detailed explanations of how Jesus saves us and how Jesus fulfills all the roles the Messiah must fill. They explain who we are and how God sees us. But they, along with the rest of the letters of the New Testament, are books of practical theology. Peter and Paul and the other writers, they don't tell us pie-in-the-sky things about God that are unimportant. There's always a point and a purpose; their theology informs how we as followers of Christ should live and act. They risked their lives and wrote their letters at no insignificant cost so that we might be able to think clearly about our God. It's that important.

If the Bible is about theology and Jesus and the disciples taught it, what should we know about it? What should we think about it? Here's my first thought: *our daily decisions show our practical theology in action*. On the surface, that seems absurd. What do all the mundane things of life have to do with my view of God? We don't think about why we do those things everyday. We may rarely think about them at all. But they are all informed by our view of God.

There are many things we feel God doesn't have an opinion about, but even that's a theological decision that says something about us and the way we view God. We drive cars to work because we don't see them as sinful...but many Amish do. We allow the moderate use of alcohol, the playing of cards for fun...but various religions and Christian communities throughout history have not. The vast majority of Christian women around the world don't cover their heads out in public...but Muslim women do. A huge number of our choices, both big and little, what we will do and we won't do, from the clothes we wear to the actions we take, they're all affected by our theology. Many of them are so ingrained that we don't even think about them; we take them for granted.

Even atheists and agnostics are theologians, and their actions show their theology. Why should an atheist be generous to others? Some aren't. Others are because of what they were taught or their view of society and the goodness of people. But why not live selfishly if there is no god? The atheist must still find an answer to that question or change the way they live to reflect their way of thinking. In our culture, even ignorance about God is an intentional choice. A thousand things we do every day speak to how we do (or don't) think about God. For the Christ follower, choosing to be ignorant is not an option.

My second point for the morning explains why: *good theology leads to faithful beliefs and wise decisions, but bad theology leads to wrong beliefs and poor decisions*. As the old saying goes, "Garbage in, garbage out." And theology never happens in a bubble; it always has practical ramifications. No place was this more evident in recent history than World War II. For decades, German scholars were supposedly on the "cutting edge" of biblical study, questioning God's existence and denying most of the Bible's claims. When Hitler rose to power, he tried to use the church as a mouthpiece, and he demanded the church remove the Old Testament and emphasize Jesus' stands against the Jewish religious leaders. The German church acquiesced. A countermovement led by Dietrich Bonhoeffer called the Confessing Church refuted the German church's willingness to preach Nazism. Yet of 13,000 German pastors, only 800 joined the Confessing Church movement. The weak and unbiblical theology of the German church made the atrocities of WWII all that easier for the Nazis to accomplish.

If it's true that our theology matters on a global scale and can affect billions of lives, it's true on a personal scale too. Let's take a controversial issue that always has people talking: are all religions equally valid, or is Jesus the only way to salvation? Believing that all religions and faiths lead to God sounds really noble. But if all religions are equal, then which one you choose doesn't matter. That means that even choosing one doesn't matter. What you believe doesn't matter. How does that affect your life? It may mean you don't push your belief on other people, but it also means that you don't have any need to do so. Your faith can be a "just me and Jesus" thing. And if all beliefs lead to God, then if I don't like something in the Bible, I can choose to ignore it, because that belief is just as good as another. If I want to do something the Bible calls sin, if I want to steal or cheat or backstab or worse, it doesn't really matter...if all religions are equal, then the religion I'm creating right now, where what I do is right all of the time, is just as good as any other. You can see where that leads.

On the other hand, if we believe that Jesus is the only way to the Father, then it really does affect us and other people. First, it means that we must make sure we genuinely belong to Christ, trusting in Him as Savior and Lord. Second, it means we have a responsibility to others. Our responsibility isn't to make them become Christians, but to present the truth of the Gospel to them so that they might respond in faith to Jesus as well. If Jesus is the only way to God, then we will want to support missionary work that spreads that news to everywhere we can possibly reach. We will want the world to hear, and we will do what we can to make it happen.

The tricky part about this is that none of us has a fully formed theology, and every theology we created is in some way flawed. We are still human beings riddled with sin and flaws. We may believe that Jesus is the only way to salvation, but we may not do much to share Him with others. Why not? Because of fear, because of time, because of distractions, any number of things. But even then, that plays into our theology. Is our God a forgiving God, a wrathful God, a just God? Does He mostly punish, mostly discipline and disciple, or mostly not care? Our perceptions of God form not only our answers to these questions, but how seriously we will take Jesus' commands. My prayer for us is that God would point out our flawed thinking so that we might think about Him rightly and act on it.

So what do we do about it? Two thoughts: pledge to God you will live a thoughtful life, and pledge to God you will ask, seek, and knock. These two pledges work together in tandem. The first pledge is the simpler of the two...it is that we will live examined lives, lives that show that we've been thinking about what we are doing. So much of what we do and say and think, we don't examine. We let it go with an "oh well." But not only is that careless, I don't believe it's God-honoring. Are we going to scrutinize every move we make? Do we have to agonize over whether we use plain bagels or whole wheat? No, absolutely not. Jesus came to give us freedom from many, many things that bind us. Examining our lives and how we do or don't live out our theology is not meant to freeze us with fear but to liberate us. Because when we go about our days consciously aware of God's presence in our lives, thoughtfully pursuing Him in the everyday moments of life, we're not always having to look back in hindsight, playing the "what if" game or "if only" game. Pledging to live thoughtfully means that we will have far less to regret from careless things we might otherwise do.

The second pledge might be a little harder, the pledge to ask, seek, and knock. This pledge comes from Jesus' own promise to us, that if we ask, we will receive; if we seek, we will find; if we knock, the door will be opened. God desires to dwell deeply in our hearts and lives; He wants to share with us the riches of His Kingdom, His wonderful wisdom, His abundant love, His overflowing mercy. Our part is simply to ask, seek, and knock.

But that means we've got to do some work. It means we need to engage on theological issues and give them real thought. One way is through Bible study. Reading the Bible daily as a devotional is fantastic and a great start. Doing a Bible study, though, will get you deeper into the Word of God and seeing what God has done throughout the course of history. Another thing we can do is read. Now I'm not talking about the latest best seller by Joel Osteen or what's topping the self-improvement charts. I'm talking about books that are written for the average churchgoer to grow deeper in their faith and their theology. In fact, I've included a list of good books worth your time to read. There are others, but these are a really good place to start.

And last but not least, talk about faith. I'm not talking about going door to door saying, "Do you know Jesus?" But I am saying that what we believe is a subject for conversation, at least with those we know and trust. It's been said that the two things you don't talk about in polite company are politics and religion. That's because you don't really know polite company. When you're in a room with a bunch of acquaintances...even if you're in a room with a bunch of relatives you see twice a year...you don't really know them. A theological conversation might generate more heat than light. Those are times to build friendships and closer bonds rather than to start debates we have no time to finish.

But with your true friends, those people who are close to you, talk of faith should be a regular thing. It may not come up at every conversation, and it doesn't have to be, "So what do you think about Old Testament prophecy?" But in typical conversations about life, faith should be coming up. Not to argue about it, not to debate it, but to bring it into our everyday existence. Talking about our faith helps us to process it and make it a part of our reality. And in those conversations, questions will come up that will drive us to think more, to delve deeper, to be stretched by the Spirit in new ways. Taking these two pledges seriously will help us to become disciples who truly know who Jesus is and why what He did is so important in our lives and in this world.

Over the past several days, I've been at a conference of the Fellowship. Many of you know that our denomination is wrestling with key theological issues, and I went to be a part of the conversation, to in some small way to guide us back to faithful and orthodox belief. I'll be sharing more about it in the coming days and weeks and months, I'm sure. We are in a unique time in history, at least in our country, where theology matters little to many people. But I am convinced that God wants us to know Him and think on Him, to study His ways diligently, to hold tightly to the truths taught by Jesus' faithful followers over the centuries. Let us make every effort to make the careful, prayerful study of God a core of who we are.