

September 28, 2025  
Paul Purdue preaching

I answered my phone and an unfamiliar but cheerful voice boom, *“Hey Paul, this is Tony Felts. I’m the director of Parks and Recreation and I am so glad you have signed Lewis and Caleb up to play baseball”*. After some pleasantries, Tony focused in, *“Paul, I’ve been talking to your buddy Kyle Rulman and I’m wondering if you would consider coaching Caleb’s team.”* I laughed. *“Tony, I’m not your guy, I haven’t played organized baseball since I was eight years old”*. Tony did not flinch *“Paul, we want high character coaches. The soccer parents tell me you are a fantastic coach. We can teach you the baseball!”*

Flattery sometimes works. Two weeks later on a rainy Saturday I found myself at the High School Gym in Goodlettsville. Tony greeted us with a big smile and sausage biscuits. They handed us a 75 page coaching guide and we spent seven hours learning tricks and drills. After lunch, one of the instructors walked us through the 27 points of hitting

1. toes aligned with the pitcher,
2. Knees bent
3. Hips and shoulders square to the pitcher.
4. Load on your back foot
5. Grip firm but relaxed
6. Bat back
7. middle knuckles aligned for better bat control.
8. Lead or left forearm in line with the bat.
9. Both eyes looking at the pitcher,
10. head level
11. And 17 other pointers

The lead presenter methodically explained each step while other lead coaches checked our stance. Around step 17 I raised my hand, *“Hey I’m struggling to remember these points, how do we expect five and six-year-olds to remember all this?”* The head coach laughed, *“My bad, you guys coaching five and six year-olds, hang in there a minute, and we will meet over by the scorers table to simplify all this”*.

Caleb and his best friend Jake Rulman selected the Cardinals over the other major league animal mascots. We had a great season, we did not get run-ruled by the undefeated Reds and finished in third place. But my highlight came when 4 year old Jayda, after striking out 77 times, finally made contact: a dribbler off the end of bat but Jayda was fast and raced to first. Watching their pitcher field the ball, I hoped the

Yankees would try to throw her out. Their throw flew into the outfield and Coach Kevin sent her to second. Coaching Third, I waved her towards third base. By now the right fielder had the ball and threw it ten feet wide of third and I sent Jayda flying home. She jumped on home plate with two feet. Not slowing down for a second she turned away from our dugout and raced back down the first base line as if we were practising baserunning. Jayda ran right off the field and into the embrace of her mom, dad and grandmother! Square up, see the ball, level swing... home run!

There are 31,000 verses in the Bible. Our Hebrew friends name 613 commandments. Each commandment or Mitzvot is not only a religious duty, it is a blessing that draws those upholding the commandments closer to God and neighbor.

31,000 verses, 613 laws, may be too many to remember or hide in our hearts. In Luke 10, a scribal expert stood up to test Jesus, *"Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"* Jesus responded asking, *"What is written in the law? How do you interrupt it?"* The scribe answered, *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself."* The scribe had combined Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 simplifying the 613 rules into one simple sentence. Jesus affirmed the scribe's interpretation, *"You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live"*. Matthew puts the "Love God and Neighbor" summary on Jesus's lips and adds *"on these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."*

How do you apply 31,000 verses to your life? You have to make decisions, you look at the Bible through a lens, you simplify, you paraphrase, you interpret. Maybe this is what it means when Jesus says *"every scribe who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of their treasure what is new and what is old."* (Matt 13:52) We may not be able to hide 31,000 verses or 613 rules in our heart, but we can live by 2 or 3 simple rules.

Beyond the complexity of 31,000 verses and 613 laws, sometimes Bible verses do not agree. For example 1 Timothy 2 declares *"I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent."* It is a good thing, the writer of Timothy was not around on Easter when Jesus and the angels ordained Mary, Magdalene, Joanna and Susana, saying *"Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers, that Christ is Risen!"* or when King Josiah and the High Priest Hilkiah consulted the prophet Huldah to see if she thought a misplaced scroll belonged in the Bible! (2 Kings 22). John Wesley taught that when we read the Bible to *"Have a constant eye to the analogy of faith... those grand fundamental doctrines."* (Wesley's Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament.)

Everyone has to make interpretive decisions, everyone reads the Bible through some sort of lens.

I think we as 21st century Christians struggle to understand the Bible in ways our first century ancestors simply could not imagine. We may be living in a world with too many words, too much interpretation, too much theology, too many denominations. Imagine Jesus and the synagogue assistant unrolling a 30 foot long leather scroll. This scroll has been copied by someone's hand. It is likely the only Isaiah scroll in Nazareth. (Luke 4) Google AI assistant tells me my phone can hold 972,800 books. In antiquity, printing was so slow and expensive that most business contracts and deeds were scratched into wet clay and baked by the sun into tablets. Scholars guesstimate that a professionally prepared complete copy of all 66 Biblical scrolls would cost a church about 30,000 denaria or around one to three million dollars. Most synagogues and churches did not have all the scrolls. (In Colossians 4 churches share what would become Scriptures)

But, what if in order to hear the Bible read you had to go to your local synagogue or church like a first century Christian? How might our faith change? What if you never owned a Bible or any other book and you carried around the Sermon on the Mount in your head and heart as the early Christians did? Would Christ show up more often in our reading, if we read the Bible regularly with 2 or 3 others?(Matt 18:20) What if you spent your whole life, only hearing the Word of God read inside a faith community? What if, reading in community, you never had to face your questions or doubts alone?

Reading and writings were not essential life skills in the ancient world. The Bible, like all ancient literature, was read aloud. When movable block letters advanced printing technology enough to create simple newspapers, reading your newspaper aloud on the train was considered good manners so you shared the news with your neighbors. The Bible was not written to be read alone!

Without a Bible at home, our ancestors met together more often, and repeated the Scriptures hiding God's Word in their hearts and storing the words in their minds. (Psalm 119, Luke 4 or 24, Acts 17, 18 or 23, Colossians 1 or 4) Most Christians could recount Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, many Psalms and the story of Jesus simply by memory. The Bible tells us how Peter, Paul, Phillip, Priscilla, the Pharisees, and Jesus explained or debated the Scriptures, but friends they were not carrying Bibles when they did this, it was hidden in their hearts and minds. What if we hid words and stories of Jesus in memories, would our faith surpass that of the scribal experts and Bible thumpers? Maybe being an expert in Nehemiah or Revelations is not what most of us need to do with our faith? Maybe 31,000 verses is too much to live by?

Now given the 31,000 verse, 613 rules, 45,000 denominations, a vast theological library at our fingertips and a million tic-toc preachers to swipe, how do we read this book, or better yet how do we live out the faith described in this book? You will have to make some decisions about what to lift up and what to set aside. Might I suggest reading the Bible as it was designed to be heard in community and reading the Bible through a lens of Love? Love God and love your neighbor, do this and you will live. Let love be your lens, your measure, your guide, your rule, because all the law and prophets hang on love. Reading the Bible with 2 or 3 other people is an act of love in and of itself.

Let us read the Bible through a lens of Love, eyes of compassion, remembering God is Love or as our Psalm reminds us

Bless the Lord, O my soul,  
     and all that is within me,  
     bless God's holy name.  
 Bless the Lord, O my soul,  
     and do not forget all The Lord's benefits—  
 who forgives all our iniquity,  
     who heals all our diseases,  
 who redeems our lives from the Pit,  
     who crowns us with steadfast love and mercy,  
 who satisfies us with good as long as we live  
 Who works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed.  
 Who is merciful and gracious,  
     slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.  
 Who does not deal with us according to our sins  
     nor repay us according to our iniquities.  
 Who removes our transgressions from us.  
 Who has compassion for us like loving parents dotting on their babies.

Let us hear the word of God together, reading with 2 or 3 others through a lens of love.  
 amen.