Ever wondered how people of faith can read the same Bible but come to different conclusions? Well today we have placed 2 scriptures beside one another that appear to contradict one another.

Let’s say that you believe that as a Christian that you are called to take a stand against military action in places like Vietnam or Iraq. Otherwise known as civil disobedience. You may believe that the US government overreaches its authority and that people of faith should stand outside a military base and protest military action.

Or let’s say that you believe that the US government overreaches its authority around issues like health care and you have a bumper sticker on your car that says, “Don’t tread on me.” You may be someone who believes that the US government is too involved in the lives of its citizens. If you believe that and you want to find a text of Scripture that you can use to defend your position, then you can turn to the Acts passage that Tom read and you can read, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.”

Or let’s say that you believe that the federal government should be more involved in the lives of its citizens. Let’s say that you believe that the government should re-institute formal prayer in schools. Let’s say that you believe that the federal government should be more involved in who should get married. Let’s say that you believe that the federal government should be more involved in regulation of environmental issues, abortion issues, and other health issues for its citizens.

If you believe in a stronger role for the government then you can turn to the text of Scripture that I read from I Peter. You can turn to this text and read that Christians should fear God and honor the emperor. That slaves should submit to their masters.

So two groups of people with different opinions can go to the Bible and each find a passage of Scripture that supports what they think. And each group would claim that they are right because the Bible gives them the answer that they desire for the Bible to give them. But for each of these two groups that go running to the Bible to defend what they already believe, then I would say that each group does not understand how to read the Bible.

Too many Christians read the Bible like it is a sprint. In a sprint race, the runners, maybe NASCAR drivers since it is race weekend here in the Charlotte area, have to quickly get to the finish line. Runners put their feet in the blocks. The gun goes off. The runners race to the finish and the winner wins by tenths or even hundredths of a second.

Too many of us have been taught to read the Bible this way. Too many of us read the Bible as if it is a sprint. For instance, you have a problem or have encountered a situation. You then open up a Bible to find an answer to your problem. And what I usually find when I open up my Bible looking for a specific answer to a situation or problem that I am encountering is that I find a specific answer. And usually it is the answer that I want to find.

So, in going back to my opening illustration, if I am opposed to a military action, I will open up the Bible and lo and behold I just happen to find a passage which supports my civil disobedience. If I believe that the president is doing a great job and support some military action that he has ordered, then I will open up my Bible and lo and behold I will find a passage which supports what I want it to say.

But what we have done when we read the Bible this way is that we have reduced the Bible into this tiny little answer manual that will tell us exactly what we want it to say. And we even are drawn to churches that will interpret the Bible exactly in the way that affirms what we already believe. And life and faith is oh so clear and simple.

But what if instead of reading the Bible like we are running a sprint, we read the Bible like we are running in a marathon? In a marathon, it doesn’t really matter how quickly you start out. The gun goes off and everyone just trots to begin the race. You set a pace. You come upon watering stations that help you keep going. You hit a wall when you feel as though you cannot make it but you work through the pain and you keep focused on the prize at the end. Running a marathon is more like a journey which takes lots of preparation and adjustment and patience.

So how do we read the Bible as a marathoner rather than as a sprinter? For one, we don’t go to the Bible to find an answer to our specific questions. Because when we pick up the Bible to find an answer to our specific question, we will find the answer that we want. Instead of reading the Bible in this fast paced way, I invite you to read the Bible as a companion. We journey with the Bible as a friend. We relate to the Bible as a partner that walks with us through life.

We read the Bible not when we are stressed and looking for specific answers. But instead we read the Bible and allow it to transform us.

The first passage we read should not be read as a defense of civil disobedience. Instead, it can be read as an example of how Peter was being told that no human institution will ever prove itself stronger than God. No human institution can defeat the purpose and will of God. It’s just not going to happen. The story from Acts shows that God is stronger than any prison and God is stronger than any government or church official. God’s will is always stronger than our human institutions.

The second text we read from I Peter is a direct contradiction the Acts passage. Here in this letter, Peter says that Christians should love God and obey the emperor. This is not a text to be used to support why Christians should support some action of the government. It is a text written to a specific community that they are blessed to live in a society with a government that gave them freedoms to express their faith and do their ministry.

We have been given a gift. **(Hold up Bible)** This gift is not something to be used to beat up someone else. This gift is not something that should be used to prove what you already believe. This gift is not something to be turned to when you want a quick and easy answer to a complex problem that you are facing.

This gift is a travel companion. This gift is a partner to walk with us on our faith journey. This gift is a friend to comfort us when we feel lonely. This gift is a friend to celebrate with when we feel joy. This gift is a voice to remind us that God is stronger than anything before us. This gift is a whisper to allow us to sense the presence of the one most Holy.

We don’t have to run to the Bible for answers. We can walk with the Bible and allow it to mold us over a life of faith development. AMEN.

-Texts: Acts 5: 12-32; I Peter 2:13-25

-Given: May 29, 2011 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)