TOP VERSES: A STRANGE IDEA

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Category: Theology

Thanks for Doug for drawing my attention to a very strange way of approaching the Bible.Â Top Verses is a website which describes itself as: *the home of the sorted Bible. We always show the most popular verses first, making it quicker to find what you're looking for. Search for a particular word, or click on a book*. Apparently the Top Verses team have analysed thousands of pages of Bible teaching material to discern what are the most popular Bible verses and books.

It isn't really surprising (but extremely sad) that none of the Old Testament books appears in the top ten Bible books. But, and be prepared to be astonished, John is the only one of the Gospels which occurs in the top ten list.Â I thought we were supposed to be Christians! Surely the words of Jesus should be the most important to us - but apparently, I was wrong.

As Doug points out it's not particularly surprising that the favourite verses in Leviticus are those that condemn homosexuality. It seems that given thousands of words of teaching about God's greatness and his moral standards, most teachers drop in on those verses which deal with one area of sexual morality. The command to love your neighbour as yourself (19:8) only comes in third place and none of the commands to look after the poor (of which Leviticus has many) are found in the top ten for that book. Perhaps the best thing about this website is the way in which it points out how the church picks and chooses Scripture to suit its own values and purposes.

But the problem is that the whole concept behind this website is flawed. The Bible is not a list of separate books or verses to be consulted almost at random. Over several centuries, God inspired a narrative, a story, not a list of proverbs or aphorisms. It makes no more sense to chop the Bible up into different bits and to separate them than it would to reorder the sentences of Lord of the Rings. I love Lord of the Rings, it's a great book and sometimes I'll sit down and read a favourite chapter, but those chapters only make sense because I know the whole book. It is the same with the Bible. It uses many literary genres: history, poetry, proverbs and prophecy, but it tells one story. To pick out one verse as a top verse makes no sense - each verse only makes sense as part of the broader narrative.

According to Top Verses the number one verse is John 3:16 (no surprises there):

> *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

This is of course a rightly famous part of the Bible. But look at it closely; the whole story of God loving the world and having to give his Son only makes sense when you understand the narrative of creation and fall in Genesis. After all, if the fall hadn't happened, God's love would be demonstrated in very different ways. And the notion of how and why God gave his Son isn't actually filled out until the death and resurrection of Jesus. In other words, you can't understand John 3:16 without understanding what went before it and what comes after it. Reading the Bible in context doesn't just mean reading the paragraph that a verse occurs in, it means understanding where the verse fits in

God's big story.

I'm not saying that the only way to read the Bible is to start from Genesis and to read through to Revelation (though every Christian should do that from time to time in my view) but I am saying that when we read the Bible we must read each section in the light of the whole story. Picking verses and books because they are popular is not the way to go.

Let me finish by repeating a quote from NT Wright which I included in a post called the purpose of the Bible:

> *And we have thereby made the Bible into something which it basically is not. I remember a well-known Preacher saying that he thought a lot of Christians used the Bible as an unsorted edition of Daily Light. It really ought to be arranged into neat little devotional chunks, but it happens to have got all muddled up. The same phenomenon occurs, at a rather different level, when People treat it as an unsorted edition of Calvinâ€™s Institutes, the Westminster Confession, the UCCF Basis of Faith, or the so-called â€˜Four Spiritual Lawsâ€™. But to treat the Bible like that is, in fact, simply to take your place in a very long tradition of Christians who have tried to make the Bible into a set of abstract truths and rulesâ€"abstract devotional doctrinal, or evangelistic snippets here and there.*

You might also find my post How much of the Bible should we translate of interest.