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Summer Sermon Series: The Spiritual Disciplines
Scripture Intake

Hopefully by now in our summer series you will have had a chance to put some of the disciplines we have discussed into practice (the discipline of prayer, worship, silence and solitude). And hopefully by now, if you have been intentional about putting some of these things into practice, perhaps you are starting to notice a bit of a change in your God-perspective. Are you more aware of God in your life and in the community? Are you a bit quicker to see God in situations and encounters? Is your understanding of God becoming broader? Is your relationship with God growing deeper? If so, I would really encourage you to share some of the changes that are happening with others – that's one of the ways we share God's blessing with others, and offer the Spirit of encouragement and comfort to others! And it's an important element of building the body of Christ into God's holy temple!

Today we are looking at perhaps the most crucial spiritual discipline there is, and it is the one that undergirds all of the others, the entirety of the Christian life for us individually and for our lives together as a community of faith: the discipline of scripture intake. The scriptures are the milk and meat for all of Christian life. They are supposed to be a part of our daily diet that nourishes us for living more deeply into the lives that God intends for us, for a deeper understanding of who God is, and how God has revealed himself in the person of Jesus Christ for the sake of reconciling all things to himself. If we have any interest in knowing God, we must be immersed in the Word of God, revealed in the scriptures and in the flesh as Jesus Christ.

Yet, sadly, less than 20% of professing Christians in North American read the bible on a regular/daily basis. It's pretty darn hard to be a Christian, it we don't know much about this God we confess to believe in. This isn't meant as a chastisement or a judgment – it is just the reality of the state of Christianity and the church in North America. And unlike people who live in countries where they don't have access to bibles and good resources, we are swimming in them (perhaps drowning in the amount of material that is out there). The most transforming spiritual practice is that of the daily intake of scripture. But this is also the one that presents the most difficulty for many of us. We wonder how 'relevant' certain parts of the bible are, we lack the skills to study scripture properly and faithfully, we don't know where to find resources, sometimes it just doesn't make sense, there are sections that offend our modern and cultural sensibilities. There are also practical challenges: where to find the time, the space, and how to develop the habit of scripture intake. The discipline of scripture intake requires significant effort.

What I'd like to do today is break down the discipline of scripture intake into three sections, and give you some suggestions on why and how the scriptures are essential for our spiritual formation – for growing a deeper relationship with God and for conforming more authentically to the image of Christ Jesus. Those three sections are hearing the Word, reading the Word, and studying the Word.

So, first – hearing the Word. Before the bible was ever written down it was always recited openly in public. For us in modern times though, hearing the Word is a discipline in itself.

When we have the freedom to read scripture in the privacy of our own homes, it takes commitment to actually make an effort to *hear* the scriptures being read. But if we don't make this a habit, we will only hear the scriptures by accident. Jesus said to his disciples, 'blessed is the one who hears the Word of God and keeps it' (Lk 11:28). Paul said that faith comes through hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ (Rom 10:17).

I have two suggestions for developing this aspect of the habit of daily scripture intake. First, make sure you are prepared to listen so that you can 'hear' properly. Ask the Spirit to guide their hearing and understanding of Scripture (this is always a good idea!). Sometimes people will sit quietly before the reading of scripture in order to calm the mind and make room for God's word. Whatever it is that we do, we need to be sure we are prepared to listen to what God has to say.

Second, if you read scripture aloud for others to hear, practice so that you do it well. The one who is reading aloud must ensure that what he or she is reading is 'hear-able'. We need to practice vocal expressions, pauses, pronunciation, punctuation, and where to put the emphasis. Preparing to read aloud is also a discipline in itself. And if you don't read scripture aloud on a regular basis – try it out. You might be surprised at what God says to you – even if it's in the privacy of your own home!

Another aspect of the discipline of scripture intake is reading scripture. This can be done aloud or in your head. But again, if less than 20% of Christians read their bibles regularly, how then can we answer Jesus when he says to us, 'have you not read in the scriptures…' (Matt 19:4; Mk 12:10). As professing Christians, we believe that *all* scripture is inspired by God – shouldn't we read it then? But again, many challenges confront us: we don't understand, we get bored, we don't make time, etc… So, where to start?

One of the most common ways to start is to find a bible-reading plan. These are available online or at the bookstore. Some of you may even have bibles that outline a bible reading plan. Now- some tips on making that plan work for you: Read in several places each day (e.g. OT, Psalms, NT). That way, even if one of the passages makes no sense or you find it boring, you can still benefit from the others. If you read three chapters each day and five on Sunday, you'd get through the whole bible in a year. If you don't want to follow a plan, keep track of what you read.

The third aspect of scripture intake is studying the scriptures. If hearing and reading the scripture is like making your way across the water in a motorboat, studying the scripture is like meandering around in a glass bottom boat. You get to explore the depths and see so much more. Or, perhaps think of it like making a cup of tea. If hearing the scripture is like dipping your tea bag into your cup for a moment, and reading the scripture is like giving it a bit of a swirl around, studying is like putting the bag in the pot and letting it steep for a bit. Ezra 'set his heart to study the Word of God' (Ezra 7:10), and the new converts in Acts received the Word of God and studied it (Acts 17:11). When we study the scriptures we write stuff down, look up cross references, take our time with it, find other instances where words or phrases are used, investigate the historical and cultural background, figure out what it actually meant to the hearers at the time and how it connects with the rest of the

scriptures, we meditate on it, chew it over, reflect and gain new insights, and look for ways to apply it to our own lives. There are host of resources available for this – if you are interested let me know and I can recommend some to you.

The bottom line for us that that the Bible is what God has given us as the source we have for testimony about who God is, what God has done, and who God reveals himself to be in and as Jesus Christ. There is no Christian faith without it. There is no relationship with God without it. Even so, as I mentioned before, the discipline of daily scripture intake is perhaps the most difficult for us to get into the habit of. So, some suggestions on how you might improve your ability to hear and obey the Word of God in your life.

1. Remember that it is the Holy Spirit that leads us into all truth (John 16:13). Ask the Spirit to guide your hearing, reading, and studying. Give yourself space to listen to the Spirit and be attentive to its leading. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your mind to what God has to say, and to give you the courage and insight to know how to obey.
2. Develop the practice of meditation. We have talked about this a bit before. Meditation is simply engaging in deep intentional thinking about a particular phrase, word, or passage. The purpose is to gain the scriptural perspective so that we can understand, apply, and offer it up to God in prayer. Let the scriptures 'steep/brew' in your brain. Linger a little. Learn to take delight in the Word of God (Psalm 1:1).
    a. Manage your expectations. Some passages are easier to meditate on than others (so choose wisely). Some passages will evoke certain emotions while others will not. Some you will hear God speak through and others you might not. Be open to all of it.
    b. When you meditate, make sure you select an appropriate passage (a doable length). Select a smaller portion of something you have read, or sometimes just a phrase is enough.
    c. Re-read, put the emphases in different parts and think about how that changes your perspective.
    d. Re-write the passage in your own words
    e. Think of an illustration or put the passage into an art form.
    f. Ask questions of the passage: what does this reveal about God or say about Jesus? What question/problem is answered? What am I supposed to do with this?
    g. Look for common themes between paragraphs and chapters
    h. Memorize it
    i. Ask 'what is commendable, pure, just, lovely, true, honourable, worthy of praise about the passage (Phil 4:8).
    j. Remember that all reading, hearing, and studying in our day and age is interpretation – so go cautiously and entrust the process to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Be aware of your own biases and perspectives and be willing

to let God change them. Use a good translation. Use several translations. Look up references.

k. Take your time and allow the Spirit to work!

And remember that those who meditate on God's word are blessed by it (Ps 1:1)!

When I think about the blessing that the scriptures are for God's people I am always reminded of what happened with the people of Israel in the days of Josiah and in the days of Nehemiah. King Josiah (2 Kings 22/640 BC) was one of Judah's 'good' kings – a man who walked in the ways of the Lord. Now, in those days, many of the actual scrolls of the Law of God (Torah) had been lost or weren't used, and for the most part, people were flying by the seat of their pants with respect to knowing God, how to obey God, and how to be the people of God. One day, while there were some renovations going on in the temple, one of the works discovered one of these scrolls in the wall of the temple. When it was brought to Josiah's attention and after he had read it, he was utterly undone as he realized how far away from God's path they had all strayed. Josiah did everything he could to lead the people back again – he purged the temple of all non-Law related influences, he had the scriptures taught to the people, and the people renewed their covenant with God.

The other event that I am reminded of with respect to the blessing of reading the scriptures occurred when the Israelites were given permission to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple after the Assyrian/Persian exile (~444BC). The governor of Jerusalem was Nehemiah, and after the temple had been rebuilt and re-dedicated, he gathered all of the people in the square (thousands of them), and had the Book of the Law (the scriptures) read aloud while the priests in the crowd explained to those gathered around them what it all meant. After years in exile, without the benefit of God's Law, they dedicated themselves to hearing and obeying everything that God had told them so that they would know God's blessing again in a rebuilt Jerusalem.

Both of these passages remind me of the power that the scriptures have to convict us of who God is and who God is calling us to be, but also the imperative that is upon us to ensure that we understand and obey the Word of God as best as we can in all circumstances. For as long as the scriptures remained at the forefront of what the people did and how they understood themselves, they were blessed by God, they were bound together by God's Spirit and work, and they thrived as a community of God's people – a witness to the nations around them.

So, in faith, let us too persevere in developing the discipline of regular/daily scripture intake. And let's trust the Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth, so that we would be fully steeped in the Word and would grow closer to God and conform more fully to the image of Christ that God is renewing in each one of us.