

Part Three: “Discipleship by the Book”

Authentic spiritual disciplines begin with the Bible. Indeed, for the Christian, the Word of God is not only the source for all spiritual disciplines, but they are explicitly directed and thoroughly empowered by an experiential knowledge of the Bible. Let me cite just three of the myriad of Scriptures testifying to the foundational nature of the Bible for day-to-day Christian living:

Matthew 7:24, 25 -- “Therefore, everyone who hears these words of Mine, and acts on them, will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock.”

John 8:31, 32 -- “So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, ‘If you continue in My word, then you are truly My disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’”

1 Timothy 4:6 -- “In pointing out these things to the brothers and sisters, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the good doctrine which you have been following.”

Let’s make sure to get this straight. Conversion transforms the repentant sinner from the kingdom of darkness to God’s glorious, liberating kingdom of light. But sanctification (that is, the Christian life wherein the disciple submits himself daily to the Lord’s will) produces a transformation that is evidenced by growth in character and consistency in godliness.

But never forget that the goal of learning the Bible is that of any other authentic spiritual discipline; namely, a life more conformed to the life of Jesus Christ. One must not allow Bible reading to be an end in itself. What does matter is getting into the Bible so that the Bible gets into you! It’s the quality of life change, not the quantity of verses read.

“Read through the Bible in a year?
Go ahead and give it a try if you want.
But we suggest you simply start with
a chapter a day because the most
important reasons for Bible intake are
understanding, appreciation,
worship of the Lord,
and the application of the Word in
your daily life.”

Learning the Bible changes your view of the world, your view of self, your view of God. As your mind is renewed (Romans 12:2), you will discover all those blessings promised in the verses of Psalm 119: delight, joy, protection, godliness, escape from temptations, victory, divine counsel, discernment, single-mindedness, deliverance from enemies, avoidance of traps, heavenly rewards, and more. Becoming familiar with the Holy Scriptures will thus make you a better ambassador for Christ, a stronger warrior, a more humble servant, a more loyal and joyful son or daughter, a more trustworthy and more valuable steward, and a more confident and adventurous pilgrim. So get into the Word!

Now, there are many approaches to Bible reading. There are a large variety of reading plans, devotional booklets, study guides, and read-through-the-Bible programs. The important

thing is to use something! Get into the Word consistently. Build your skills and perseverance. Be disciplined as a disciple must be. And even though there will be failures along the way, the Lord is a loving, merciful God Who abounds in forgiveness and fresh starts. Therefore, the authentic disciple of Jesus embraces God's grace and continues to try. To help you stay with it, go with practical, do-able approaches. Stretch your spiritual muscles and get better over time. Use the encouragement, assistance, and accountability of others to stay the course. And keep asking God to move you forward and to have His Word do a great work in your mind and heart.

"I never saw a useful
Christian who was not a
student of the Bible."
(D.L. Moody)

What about Bible study, doing more than just reading? I'm all for it. Indeed, Bible study is for all believers. It's not only for the pros, or the mature, or for Christians with certain gifts or backgrounds or personality types. Serious Bible study is a mark of all successful disciples.

2 Timothy 2:15 -- "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a worker who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth."

Acts 17:11 -- "Now these people [the believers of Berea] were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so."

The motivations for a more careful, investigative study of Scriptures may come from many sources but whatever gets one started, consider these 4 keys to hermeneutics (the science of Bible interpretation).

"If you are ignorant of God's
Word, you will always
be ignorant of God's will."
(Billy Graham)

1) Patient study. Briefly put, this means go slow; don't jump to conclusions; don't allow one source to cement your interpretations too quickly; be careful of your prejudices and presuppositions. Take your time and be honest, humble, and thorough enough to let the scriptures explain themselves.

2) Context. One of the primary reasons to go slow is to let you better appreciate the context of any given word or verse or passage before you start making interpretative conclusions and applications. The Bible is literature, written in different genres, and yet designed by God to interconnect in overarching themes and conclusions. If you go too fast or are too lazy to read what surrounds that particular word or verse or passage, you'll likely miss the point. Oh, how much theological error could be avoided if students simply paid attention to the context!

3) Assemble the team. To accurately interpret the Bible, you need the Church. For instance, you must start with the linguists who were well-versed enough in the Bible's original languages to give you an accurate translation. You also need scholars of history, archeology, geography, science, and many other academic disciplines in order to get the full story of God's revelation. You also need mature Christians who have been studying (and applying) the Bible for many years, people who are willing to enlighten and encourage you.

Take my “study team” as an example. I begin with the scholars who translated my NASB and NKJV Bibles. I also like to read Kenneth Wuest’s translation of the New Testament. But also on my team are many other scholars who have written word studies, Bible commentaries, devotionals, history, books on practical Christian living, and many, many other important contributions. There are also the teachers and preachers I’ve listened to on radio and tapes, and those I’ve enjoyed in person through sermons and classes. And, not at all to be forgotten, are team members who are simply “good friends and true” whose love for God’s Word makes them enlightening, stimulating counselors and encouragers.

“We must come to the Bible with the purpose of self-exposure consciously in mind. I suspect not many people make more than a token stab in that direction. It's extremely hard work. It makes Bible study alternately convicting and reassuring, painful and soothing, puzzling and calming, and sometimes dull - but not for long if our purpose is to see ourselves better.” (Larry Crabb)

4) And finally, though you may think I’m repeating myself too often on this point, **the purpose of Bible study is a changed life.** The true disciple pursues the spiritual disciplines of Bible reading and study not to master the Word, but so the Word’s mastery of him becomes more consistent, profound, and rewarding.

Another Bible-related discipline of great importance to many is memorization. But let me emphasize here that, although I

believe memorization to be of great value, it is only so if the applications of those verses are showing up in one’s daily life. Ongoing involvement with the texts of Scripture is always of greater value than merely remembering them. So, rather than concentrating on mere memory, make sure that you are getting involved with the Bible texts. Write them down where you have frequent access to them. Study them. Meditate on their content and applications. Use them in your prayers. Talk to others about them. All of these things are more valuable than simply being able to recite the verses. And yet, with all that said, it’s certainly true that the greater your familiarity and appreciation is of those texts, the easier it will be to go ahead and make memory verses out of them!

Hebrews 4:12 -- “For the Word of God is living and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword, even penetrating as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

And one more point. I urge the disciple to make a priority of “Bible intake” even when it doesn’t necessarily involve reading. For instance, even the illiterate, the severe dyslexic, the young child, the blind, and those that do not have a Bible translated in their language can still receive Bible teaching if they have, as the particular need requires, an audio source, a reader, a preacher, or a translator.

I stress this for three reasons. 1) To encourage the use of audio versions of the Bible for those who cannot read or who have great difficulty in reading or who are engaged in normal activities where they cannot turn pages (i.e., walking, driving, ironing, working on the car). 2) To emphasize the tremendous, life-changing value of being a Bible reader to the young, to the aged, and others whose management of the written word is limited. And 3) To suggest that reading the Scripture aloud is not only a very helpful service for others, but it can be of great effect in one’s

own understanding and appreciation of the Bible. Furthermore, speaking aloud the Bible can be a superb help in memorization.