

We continue our summer teaching series called *Revive: A Summer of Blessing and Growth*. In the first half of the series, we read a series of benedictions or good words, which came from God to us. Good words to bless us with reminders that we are lifted up from darkness, loved by God without condition, and led by God along this journey, protected and being prepared to spend eternity with him in heaven. Encouraged with these blessings, he then gives us tools for the journey, tools that will grow us and form us in this life. We call these tools spiritual disciplines, or spiritual practices. Last week in the second half of our summer series, we were challenged to unplug regularly and practice solitude with God. If you didn't hear Mark's message last week, go to our website and listen.

This week, we introduce another spiritual practice. It's the practice of Scripture Reading. Our purpose this morning is not for you to walk out of this place being reminded Scripture is important, and we all should read it more often. Our purpose this morning is to appreciate the power of Scripture to change our lives.

Through the spiritual practice of Scripture, we learn we don't read Scripture just for information; we read it to experience transformation.

This week I read about the events surrounding the life of fourth-century church leader, St. Augustine. As a young man, Augustine had a reputation for loose living. His mother, Monica, became a Christian, and she worried about her son. She prayed tearful prayers for her son for many years. As Augustine sought out every worldly pleasure he could experience, he also sought answers to life's basic questions. He would follow various philosophers and eventually became disillusioned with each of their teachings.

One day, while working as a teacher of rhetoric in Milan, he went to hear the preaching of Saint Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan. He went to listen to his well-known eloquent style, but his preaching of the Scriptures led Augustine to a new understanding of the Bible and Christian Faith.

Later that year, in 386 AD, Augustine and his friend Alypius were spending time in Milan. While outdoors Augustine heard the voice of a child singing a song. The words were "Take it and read it." Over and over again, "Take it and read it." He thought he was overhearing some children playing a game. But there were no children around, and he had never heard of a child's game like that.

Then he thought, "Maybe these words are a command from God to open and read the Scriptures, so he located a Bible and

"He took it and read it." The first passage he saw was from Paul's letter to the Romans, Chapter 13 verses 13–14. It said,

...not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual excess and lust, not in quarreling and jealousy. Rather, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the desires of the flesh.

After reading the Scripture, Augustine writes he felt his heart was flooded with light. He repented of his sin and became a follower of Christ. Easter Sunday, 387 AD, Ambrose baptized Augustine and his friend, Alypius. From then on, God used Augustine's speaking and writing for his glory.

He was outdoors in Milan. Heard "take it and read it." He read Romans, and God brought him to his knees. May we understand the power we hold in our hands when we take up Scripture and read it.

We Don't Read Scripture Just for Information; We Read it to Experience Transformation

At Central Peninsula Church we have no desire to fill each other with information. We have no desire to have more and more people believe in the truth of the Bible in principle, but not know its power in their lives. Jesus told the elites in his day, the educated Pharisees who knew a lot of information, they couldn't understand the Scriptures or the power of God. Why? Because they were unwilling to surrender to God.

We enter a blessed place when we finally discover we can't please God in our own strength. We enter a blessed place when we finally know we must let go of trying to control our lives and surrender to him. We enter a blessed place when we move beyond just admiring the truth. We enter a blessed place when we put our faith in that truth in ways, which leads to obedience.

Being tasked to bring this kind of message this morning, raises questions in my own heart. About how sinful and hypocritical it would be for me to project from this stage I have somehow arrived and God's word already fully permeates every area of my mind, heart, spirit, and soul. And I somehow have attained a single-minded purpose with everything I say and do being driven by Scripture. But no, I am a work in progress like everyone else. My flesh and spirit battle for control just like everyone else's.

Understand if we choose to embark on this deeper journey called the spiritual discipline of scripture, we will feel what Augustine felt. In his journal he wrote, "I longed for sexual purity and innocence and yet was not ready to change my lifestyle and feared

losing pleasure." He struggled to surrender as scripture opened his heart and his heart clashed with truth. Early in his journey he wrote, "Lord give me chastity, but not yet."

We want intimacy with God, yet we run from it. We long to be generous, but we also hoard and indulge. We serve others because we are driven by the rush we feel not from serving God, but from the praise people give us when we serve. And Paul understands the internal battle going on. Paul said, "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

God give us simple and undivided hearts today. Transform us to want what you want. Help us to believe and help us to claim the promises you give us when we pick up and read your Word. Help us to genuinely want your Word to change us like it changed Augustine.

Listen to these promises from Isaiah about the power of God's Word going forth and into our hearts.

**As the rain and the snow
come down from heaven,
and do not return to it
without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for
the eater,
so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.
(Isaiah 55:10–11)**

So how do we read the Bible in such a way that it changes us? Let's start with a metaphor from the Bible. When Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus, he told husbands to love their wives; he used this analogy to illustrate what this kind of love would look like.

**...just as Christ loved the church and gave himself
up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the
washing with water through the word, and to
present her to himself as a radiant church, without
stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and
blameless. (Ephesians 5:25–27)**

Jesus compares us, his church, to a bride. We are the bride of Christ to be washed by the word. What does that mean? What happens when something gets washed? I hadn't washed my car in maybe years. This week I had enough. California rains and road runoff could not keep up with the grime. I hated to spend the \$9.00, but man, I love the way my car looks now. It's 18 years old, but it looks great. Only after washing could I get a glimpse of the state for which it was originally designed.

When we are away from His Word, our minds and hearts become cluttered with false beliefs and wrong attitudes. It becomes dirty with bad habits, deadly feelings, misguided plans, hopes, and fears. Some of us are like old cars. Our hearts are cluttered and dirty and need a washing—a fresh washing with His Word.

I know my thoughts are soiled. I lack a pure heart. In one moment I want to hear from God; the next I want to use what I have heard to impress people with how spiritual I appear. That's a soiled thought God brought to my attention, which needs washing by His Word.

I was confronted with this last week. My TV cable bill is too high. This isn't good stewardship, but I was torn by my double-mindedness. I wanted a lower bill, but at the same time, I wanted to keep all the stupid silly channels I currently get so I haven't changed yet. Soiled thoughts for sure, but we have dirtier thoughts than cable bills, which need to be washed out. So let's look closer at how the Word of God deep cleans us. We land today on two verses in chapter four of the Book of Hebrews.

First a little background on chapter four of Hebrews. The writer begins by telling us that the Israelites in the Old Testament believed in God but they didn't have faith in God's Word so they didn't obey His command to enter and claim the Promised Land. They wandered in the desert for 40 years. The writer tells us the Old Testament Promised Land was to be "their place of rest." Their place of rest served to point all mankind to the perfect rest offered to all through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, God's only begotten Son. Jesus Christ is our true rest. And God's "true rest" comes when we stop our efforts and rest in Christ. True rest comes when we believe in our heart and confess with our mouth that Jesus Christ is Lord.

And he tells us, as we live in this rest, to make every effort every day to realize more fully this rest we have been given because of Christ. There is deeply entrenched dirt in all of us, and a washing of His Word requires honesty and surrender. To more fully and deeply embrace this rest, we need a washing of the Word. We need the spiritual practice of scripture.

**For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper
than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even
to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it
judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.
(Hebrews 4:12)**

When we take God's Word and read it, we are confronted by God himself. Of the 32 million books in the Library of Congress, the only book, which claims to be alive, is the Scriptures. "**Active**" comes from the original word for energy. Literally, the Word of God is alive and "at work." The writer of Hebrews compared God's word to a sword—a sharp sword, which can lay open a person with one slashing blow. The sword of scripture can open our inner life; expose it to ourselves and others. Also, the writer makes a point to describe it as "**double-edged.**" It can cut both ways. One commentator said the word of God could cut away what is false, and dirty with one bladed side and unveil the purity and cleansing power of truth with the other. One side strips away what is false and the other side unveils what is true. The idea is not so much dividing as it is penetrating the whole person, soul, and spirit.

Permeating every spiritual body part, even the parts as refined and deeply hidden as joints and marrow are in a physical body.

Even though on our own, our hearts and thoughts deceive us, God's Word brings clarity, which allows us to discern and judge our own thoughts and intentions.

Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account. (Hebrews 4:13)

Nothing is hidden. God sees everything. There is no escape, so he says surrender. The term "laid bare" is a wrestling term, to grab around the neck and force the head to look up and see the one more powerful. Laid bare means when we take up and read God's Word, we are compelled to look up and know we can't hide our faces from God.

When we take the Word and read it, God exposes the dirt, bitterness, impatience, anger, frustration, anxiety, worry, fear, uncertainty, inferiority, and lust. As the Holy Spirit sows God's word deep into those dark corners and dirty closets, and as we invite him in through surrender, he brings things to light and cleans or cuts away the dirt.

How do we realize more and more this rest we have been given because of Christ? We stop believing the old lies. We see the false advertising of the world for what it is, and we renounce it. Then we replace the lie with the truth God's Word unveils. We believe the truth, put our faith in the truth, and we obey the truth. Where does the power to obey come from? It comes from the Holy Spirit living in us, which was promised to us when we became followers of Jesus.

I hope what we have learned so far inspires you to have Scripture as a key spiritual discipline for your spiritual growth. There are many ways we can read the Holy Scriptures, which will bring transformation, not just information. In the next five minutes, I want to show you a way you can incorporate the spiritual discipline of Scripture more and more in your life.

Reading—The first is pick it up and read it. I recommend not trying to read large amounts like you were reading a novel, but take small passages. Read one Psalm or part of a Psalm, or a few verses from a gospel or one of Paul's letters. Read it once then slow down and read it again. Put on the brakes. Slow down. The purpose of this discipline is to let God speak to you through his word, so you can obediently follow. Word of God transformation begins with slow, steady, and regular reading of God's Word. We will call reading taking a bite of spiritual food.

Meditation—Once you take a bite of spiritual food, we need to chew it. I remember as a kid we were supposed to chew every bit of food 20 times before we swallowed. Chewing the food is meditation. Biblical meditation is not emptying your mind. It's filling your mind with what you read. I find it can be easier to focus on

one verse. What does it mean? Think deeply. Picture yourself in the setting of the verse. What part speaks most clearly to you? Why would God want this for you today? Do other people come to mind that you should engage with? Is there a sense that you need to confess, repent, shift a direction or behavior? Ask the Holy Spirit to show you what your soul needs?

Early in my ministry, we had moved to a new church in a new area, and I was pretty young. I felt a need to be mentored by an older pastor. I asked around and discovered there was a pastor in a tiny church in a tiny town about an hour from where I lived. I thought, "What could this guy help me with?" I soon discovered Don had been a pastor of a large church in Denver for many years. When his wife was diagnosed with MS, he moved back to his hometown of 300 people to pastor a church of about 100 people so he could have the extra time to care for his wife. He never left his parsonage or church without taking Judy with him.

I can be pretty thick-headed, but it didn't take me long to realize I had a lot I could learn from Don Leigh. I drove up to meet with him, and we talked for a while. He said, "What can I help you with?"

I said, "I want to grow spiritually. I want to learn from you. I'd like to read a book with you. Any suggestions?"

He said, "I just started a book by a French Mystic named Madame Guyon."

I'm in rural Wisconsin, and we read a book together called *Experiencing the Depth's of Jesus Christ* by a 17th-century French Mystic. It was awesome. Here is a quote from her I think will challenge you.

If you read quickly, it will benefit you little. You will be like a bee that merely skims the surface of a flower. Instead, in this new way of reading with prayer, you must become as the bee who penetrates into the depths of the flower. You plunge deeply within to remove the deepest nectar. (Madame Guyon)

Prayer—if reading is taking a bite, and if meditation is chewing, then prayer is savoring the food.

Prayer is taking all the thoughts, feelings, fears, convictions, and questions you have meditated on and verbalizing them back to the Lord in prayer. Praise God for who he is. If you feel convicted, ask forgiveness, accept his forgiveness and ask for guidance and strength to obey going forward.

There is no reason for this to be hard. Talk to God. Ask his help like you would ask a family member. God wants to help us. He combines our brokenness with his power to change and his love for us: It's a perfect relationship.

Contemplation (act)—We took a bite, we chewed, we savored our spiritual food, and now we digest. We need to make this food part of our body. Don't skip this final step. Stay in the presence

of God, feel his closeness, be still before him—surrendered. Let him tell you how to put his Word into action. Finish your time with him with one specific thing God wants you to do to put the truth he revealed to you to work in your life. Kind of a “Today I need to....”

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. (James 1:22)

I had coffee with a friend on Friday. I love our coffees together. My friend is battling stage two cancer. I want so badly to encourage my friend, but each time we meet, I walk away thinking, I don't think I encouraged him, but boy did he encourage me.

My friend is a blessed man. He loves his wife passionately and she him. He loves his children with all his heart. He loves Jesus. God has given him energy to work, play and serve him. I joked about how others if they knew him, would envy the richness of his life even as he battles through his cancer treatments.

On Friday we talked about surrender. He said something I will never forget.

He said, “My Christianity is not about externals. It's about the place which the Word of God has inside us. I have learned to surrender. I can't control the outcome of this. I must accept wherever this leads. Of course, I want to live a long life, but it isn't up to me.” My friend is a man who has entered into God's rest.

And he would tell you the Word of God brought him to a place of surrender, hope, and healing, which led to rest. May the spiritual practice of scripture lead us into spiritual transformation. May the spiritual practice of scripture help us realize the place of rest God has made available to us because of Christ.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2018 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA
Catalog No. 1438-10FC

This message from Scripture was preached on Sunday, August 5, 2018 at Central Peninsula Church.

www.cpc.org