

At age 17 I don't believe I'd ever held a bible in my hand, much less opened one to read it. But, almost as if out of nowhere, I hungered for it. I searched through our house, but all I could find was something Catholics call a missal. When some Jehovah Witnesses knocked on our front door, I eagerly took all the literature they'd give me, but I still couldn't find a Bible.

What I did find, though, was Jesus. One evening I knelt beside my bed and cried out for him to save me. The only thing I remembered was something we used to recite at Mass, "Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Little did I know at the time, those words actually came from the Bible; out of the mouth of John the Baptist when he saw Jesus.

A few weeks later I told a friend what had happened to me. Already I felt like my life was changing. I didn't really even know how to describe it, but a couple months later she gave me this copy of the New Testament. I didn't begin reading it right away, but three months later I went off to college, and over the course of the next few months, I read the whole thing. I didn't always understand everything I read, but I was hooked.

I had "quiet times" before I even knew I was supposed to. I could spend hours, reading and then writing down what I was learning and how it all intersected with my life. I memorized hundreds of verses. I discovered the Psalms and couldn't believe there was a book inviting me to express the wide range of emotions I was feeling as a young man and new believer. It was during those college years I began to dream about the possibility God was calling me to teach God's Word as a vocation.

And so I went to graduate school to prepare. The Bible was written mostly in Hebrew and Greek, so I learned to read and study the Bible in those languages. I learned the science of Hermeneutics. I learned the Bible was without error. I could study it as a history book, as a collection of great literature, as a tool for developing a systematic theology, and even as a psychology text showing the various facets of the human condition.

I also discovered I could use the Bible to help others. This was about the most exciting thing I'd ever done—to open this book and share what I'd learned with others and see God use it to change their lives as well.

It was exhilarating, and to this day I'm so thankful for what I learned, and I continue to use those tools, but I wish someone had told me there was a danger in all of this. The danger is I

began to read and study the Bible less as God living word to me, and more as a textbook I had to master. I began to see every insight or discovery I made as material for a sermon I'd preach to others, rather than God's personal word to me. I began to see my Bible reading as a way to check off chapters from a reading list rather than a way to feed my hungry soul.

Make no mistake, I love God, and I love his word. But I've had to work hard to get back to that very personal way of reading the Scriptures with which I started. I think about the difference between how we read a textbook and how we read a personal note from someone we care about deeply. With a textbook, we cram and absorb information into our head and try to keep it there long enough to regurgitate it on a test. There's no emotional connection with the author or the content. But a personal note, whether an email or text message or a birthday card, is different. You savor every word. In her book *Sacred Rhythms*, Ruth Haley Barton writes,

The information-gathering mindset is very appropriate and helpful for a student in an academic or a learning environment. But when applied to Scripture, this approach doesn't serve the deeper longing of our heart—the longing to hear a word from God that's personal and intimate and takes us deeper into the love that our soul craves. The study of Scripture is important, but if we stop there, we'll eventually hit a wall spiritually. Information gathering may be exhilarating and even useful at times, but in the end, our soul knows there must be something more.

Today, I want to talk about the, "something more." Maybe you're at a place where you long for that. We've been looking at several practices, which will put us in a position to grow in the character of Jesus. In this message, we will consider our engagement with God's word. While there are many benefits to studying God's Word, I want to think about how to approach it more personally than we would a textbook. Turn to Hebrews 4:12–13.

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. 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.

The Efficacy of the Word of God

These are wonderful verses about the word of God. In fact, these are two of the many verses I memorized as a young follower of Jesus. They describe what scholars call the efficacy of God's word. The word of God is powerful and potent. But we often misunderstand these verses because we take them out of their original context.

Notice the first word of v. 12—*“For.”* That word tells us the writer is going to make a statement based on something he just said. What, then, did he just say? In v. 11 he said, *“Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience.”*

The writer of Hebrews has been talking about Israel in the wilderness and using them as an example. That first generation who came out of slavery in Egypt failed to enter into the rest of the Promised Land because of their unbelief (3:19). Their disobedience was their unbelief; a failure to trust the Word of God, the promises of God that he'd care for them, give them victory, and forgive them. They didn't believe it. They grumbled and wanted to turn back to Egypt rather than trust God. That was their unbelief and their disobedience. Don't be like them, the writer is saying; their failure to trust kept them from entering God's rest.

Now we can see the connection between verse 11 and verse 12. Be diligent with this word of God to believe it. Why? Because *“the word of God is living 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.”*

One of the functions of the Word of God, when it enters into us, is that it penetrates very deep—like a sword through tough, hard layers—and makes judgments about what's there. By the way, the word “judge” doesn't mean “condemn.” It means “assess.” God's word penetrates the deepest place of our hearts and assesses what's there. Is it good or bad? It penetrates to the bottom of our heart and exposes belief or unbelief. Day in and day out we need to fight unbelief in the promises of God. And the word of God assesses our thoughts and intentions as to whether they're believing or unbelieving. Are we trusting the promises of God or aren't we?

So the Word of God is like a sword, which cuts through our defenses and exposes what's really in our hearts, and it does even more. It doesn't just expose us; it cleanses us. You see this in Ephesians 5 where Paul told husbands to love their wife as Christ loved the church, and then he said more about Christ's love. He said, *“Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word...”* (Ephesians 5:25–26). Jesus loved us and gave his life for us and cleanses us, purifies us, by washing us with his word.

Think about how this has manifested in your life. I can remember in our first year of marriage Lynn and I were struggling to get

along like a lot of young married couples do. We didn't always know how to resolve conflict, so there were times a good deal of resentment built up in both of us. I remember so distinctly how one day God used his word to cleanse me of my resentment. He did it through 1 Corinthians 13—you, know—the “love chapter” that's so familiar we hardly pay attention. But God used those words to cleanse me: *“Love is patient, love is kind... it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs... It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”* I found myself on my knees, confessing and repenting. The word of God was cutting deep, but it was also cleansing me.

That's what it means for the Word not just to expose our hearts but to also wash and cleanse our hearts. Without God's word, we'd know very little about who God is. Without God's word, we'd know little about right and wrong. Without God's word, we'd have no reason for hope.

Transformational Engagement with the Bible

But maybe you're struggling with this. Maybe the Bible intimidates you. It's a big book. Maybe the Bible confuses you. There are a lot of things that don't make sense on the surface. Maybe the Bible has become boring to you. You tried to read through the Bible in a year but got stuck in the tedium of Leviticus.

Today I want to talk to you about a method of engagement with the Bible, which may be new to you. For some of you, you've been doing this for years and didn't even know it. Either way, it's a variation of a method that has worked for people for centuries—called *Lectio Divina*, which means sacred, or spiritual reading. I like to call it, Transformational Engagement with the Bible. It doesn't matter what you call it. We're talking about the slow, contemplative reading and praying of the Scriptures, which enables you to engage with God and his word in a life-changing way. Traditionally, *Lectio Divina* is made up of four parts, but I'm going to offer five. Let's take a look at them.

Preparation

The first step is preparation. To prepare for this process, it helps just to find that place where you can be alone. Go there and be silent for a moment and ask God to prepare your heart and allow you to listen to him. You'll also want to choose a small paragraph of scripture, maybe 6–8 verses long. It's better to choose a paragraph than just one verse because you can read it and understand it in context. Personally, I like to go through books of the Bible one paragraph at a time, which again, helps me understand the context.

Reading

The second step is to simply read it. But don't read it like you read the news (really fast), read it like you would a personal note. Put on the brakes. Last week we talked about “slowing.” Well, we need to apply that to our Bible reading. Read it slowly and

savor it. Let the words sink in one at a time. Read through it once. Then slow down and read through it again. The purpose of this reading is to let God speak to you. Then read it one more time. Transformational engagement with the Bible begins with a slow, reverential reading of the text.

Meditation

The third step is meditation. That means you think about it. You ponder it. You chew on it. During this time ask, “What jumps out at me? What doesn’t make sense? How am I reacting to this text? What does it make me feel? How does this intersect with my life?”

If the paragraph you just read is a story ask, “Where do I see myself in this story?”

Sometimes meditation is hard because our minds drift. Henri Nouwen once said, “Your inner life is like a banana tree filled with monkeys jumping up and down.” Can you relate? It’s not easy to sit in solitude and meditate on God’s word. It takes perseverance to do this. Sometimes, I have to take each monkey down one by one!

Prayer

This leads us to the next step in the process, which is prayer. In Transformational engagement with the Bible, there’s a time spent in prayer where you just listen to God. Ask him, “God what are you saying to me today?” Wait for his Spirit to show you, through the Word, what he wants you to know.

This is also time when you pour out your heart to God. Maybe he’s speaking to you about an attitude, which needs correcting. Ask him to help you make it right. Maybe he’s encouraging you, reminding you, that he loves you and will never leave you. Thank him for that. Maybe he’s telling you to reach out to someone you’ve been estranged from. Ask him to help you do that. During this time of prayer, you cry out to God, asking him for strength, guidance, and direction. If God is challenging you to do something that seems impossible, talk it over with him. As you pray about it, he’ll pour his power and direction into your life.

Contemplation

The last step of this process is contemplation. This sounds a lot like meditation, but it’s different. Contemplation is the process of figuring out how to apply God’s Word. As you prayerfully read the Scriptures, ask yourself, “Is there a warning to heed? A promise to claim? An example to follow or avoid? A command to obey? A sin to confess?” The goal is to define what specific thing God wants you to do in order to put these truths to work in your life. This is what it’s all leading up to. James says, *“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says”* (James 1:22).

Reading the Bible in Community

I need to say something about one area I haven’t mentioned here as part of this process, which is the role of other believers in transformational engagement with the Bible. It’s important to understand we’re made to be part of a Body—the Body of Christ, and we need each other. We don’t read the Bible in isolation; we read in Community. So let me suggest three ways the Body of Christ can enhance our engagement with the scripture.

Commentaries

First of all, by reading what other gifted believers have said or written about the passage you’re reading. Usually, that comes through, what we call commentaries, or perhaps something like a podcast or even a devotional book. Personally, I see the commentaries on my shelf as a host of friends, many of who lived centuries ago. In this communion of saints, I learn what others have said about this passage. Many of those men and women are far more insightful and learned than I am. I’d be foolish to ignore what they’ve learned. This also protects me from misunderstanding a text. If I understand a text in a way, which is different from how everyone else understands it, I might need to rethink it.

Preaching

Second, I engage with the Bible in community through worship and preaching. The proclamation of the word of God in our worship is one of the ways God uses scripture to speak to us.

I can recall coming to church one Sunday broken over my own sin. I was sure I was about to be put on the shelf by God; that he’d finally had enough of me and would never use me again. Then I came to church, and the pastor spoke from Jeremiah about the potter and the clay, and how sometimes the potter would crush what he was forming only to take that same lump of clay and reshape it. It was one of those times I knew God was speaking to me, comforting me, reminding me He’s committed to forming and shaping me into the likeness of His Son. I left church that day a different person.

Of course, there are times we come to church and hear the sermon and were not sure what we were supposed to take away from it. I mean how many sermons have you heard? I’ll bet you can count on one hand how many you actually remember. But I’d argue you still needed those messages. I mean you’ve been eating two to three meals a day your whole life, right? How many of those meals do you remember—very few? But you still needed to eat, didn’t you? We need to hear the preaching of God’s word, and thank God for it, even when it’s not that memorable.

Small Group Community

Finally, I engage with the Bible in community through a small group. One of my heroes of the faith was, Philipp Spener, a

Lutheran Pastor who lived in the mid-1600's. By this time, the Lutheran church had grown cold and lifeless. Spener saw this and wanted to do something about it. He called for "a more extensive use of the word of God among us." He proposed the reintroduction of the "the ancient and apostolic kind of church meetings," which he later called the Collegia Pietatis. These were small groups of believers who'd gather after church in a home to discuss the sermon. Spener believed in the priesthood of all believers, which was the radical idea all believers (not just pastors) could use the scriptures to edify themselves and their neighbor. Spener believed people would be more honest and open about their questions and concerns in the context of a small group rather than in church or even in private with their pastor. And it worked. God used those groups to bring renewal to the Lutheran church in Germany.

That's why we're committed to small groups here. God's word often comes to us indirectly, through a friend we've allowed to get close enough to us to speak into our lives. That's part of how God shapes and transforms us.

Last week Dom encouraged you to take 15 minutes each day this week and practice silence, solitude, and slowing. He encouraged

you to practice this, not because you should, nor even because it's good for your soul (though both of those are good reasons). Practice it because you have an open invitation from your heavenly Father to learn His way of life. So let me encourage you this week to use this time for transformational engagement with the Bible. Perhaps these words from Dietrich Bonhoeffer will wet your appetite:

The Word of Scripture should never stop sounding in your ears and working in you all day long, just like the words of someone you love. And just as you do not analyze the words of someone you love, but accept them as they are said to you, accept the Word of Scripture and ponder it in your heart... Do not ask, 'How shall I pass this on?' but 'What does it say to me?' Then ponder this word long in your heart until it has gone right into you and taken possession of you.

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