

Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People sermon series
The Practice of Reading Scripture – 2 Tim. 3:10-17
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I have started seeing a spiritual director recently. If you don't know what that is, a spiritual director is kind of like a therapist for your soul. When Rick asked me why I came to see him, I told him I wanted to deepen my spiritual life. He said, "What does that mean?" I said, "I don't know, but it sounds good." He asked, "How do you know your spiritual life isn't deep enough already?" I said, "Because I feel like I should be doing more than I am." He responded, "Don't we all feel that way when it comes to God?" He later asked what I was preaching about, and I said I was in the middle of a sermon series called "Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People." Then I laughed at myself and said, "I'm preaching to other people about how they don't have to do more to be closer to God, and yet I'm sitting in a spiritual director's office because I don't feel like I'm doing enough to be closer to God."

That's the trap we can easily fall into as Christians. Because faith is not a concrete, tangible thing, we will always be chasing "good enough" when it comes to our relationship with God. That's why, during this sermon series, Trish and I have tried to show you that, when it comes to developing and nurturing a relationship with God, the focus is on quality over quantity. Instead of thinking we needed to add an extra check box to our spiritual "to-do" list, we've encouraged you to see the things you are already doing through a spiritual lens. Practices like celebrating, slowing down listening, and praying are all things most of us do already but don't claim as a spiritual discipline. But they can be if we look at our life through the eyes of faith.

Our last spiritual practice is something that does take some intentionality, and that's reading scripture. While we can be more focused on how we listen or how we slow down without doing anything extra, we can't really practice reading the Bible unless we open the book and read it. That always reminds me of this joke that is terribly outdated but still makes me laugh if you get the punchline. One time, a pastor was visiting the house of some congregation members. In an effort to impress the visiting clergy, the father said to the little girl, "Honey, go get that book with the really small writing that Mommy and I like to read to you every night." The little girl came back in a few minutes with the TV Guide.

So, why don't we read the Bible more? Frankly, it's intimidating. The big book. The small print. The funny language. You'd think it's just a book, but it's not. Sure, it has a cover, a spine, a table of contents. If you didn't know any better, you'd think you were supposed to read it like you read any other book. Start at the beginning, read through the middle, if it gets boring, skip to the end. The only problem with the Bible is that if you skip to the end, you'll be smack dab in the middle of Revelation, which reads more like a Stephen King novel than holy scripture. No, the Bible is not just any old book. So how do we read it?

The Bible isn't just one book; it's a collection of books, with diverse material ranging from history to poetry and from biography to prophecy. So where do you even start? I'll give you some suggestions later, but before we talk about how to read it, we need to talk about why to read it. We all know we're supposed to, but most of us probably don't as often as we should, if at all. It's an intimidating book, and if you don't know where to start, it's easy to get lost in a whirlpool of begats and Jehosephats. And to be honest, it's not always a page-turner. So before we read it, we have to be motivated by something other than our grandma's voice in our heads cajoling us to do it. Why read it?

One reason people read it is for information. After all, the Bible contains the history of the Jewish people, which sets the stage for the arrival of Jesus of Nazareth. So many of its stories are a part of our cultural lexicon – Noah’s Ark, David and Goliath, the parting of the Red Sea. Even non-believers know of these things. As a believer, if you want to know about who Jesus was, what he taught, how he died, the Bible is a storehouse of great information. The Bible tells us what God wants us to know. But that’s not the only reason to read it.

Some people read the Bible for formation. They want to know what they need to do in order to obtain their “Get into Heaven Free” card or to figure out how to make up for their mistakes. I visited an elderly lady once in the hospital, and when I walked into the room she had the Bible open in front of her. I remarked that scripture must be important to her, and she said, “Not really. I haven’t read it very much.” I asked her why she was reading it now, and she said, “I’m cramming for my final exam!” That’s reading the Bible for formation. It tells us what God wants us to do. But that’s also not the only reason we should read it.

We don’t read it only for information, and we don’t read it only for formation. We read it for transformation. We read it to learn what we should know; we read it to learn what we should do; and, I would say most importantly, we read it to learn who we should be. That’s what I love about the passage we read from 2 Timothy today. Paul says all these great things about scripture and how we’re supposed to use it, and then he adds a “so that.” It’s as if someone said, “Yeah, yeah, yeah, Paul, I get it, reading the Bible is important. So what?” And Paul answers, “So that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”

The Bible has the power to fundamentally change the orientation of our lives away from ourselves and toward God. The story it tells has the power to reorder our priorities and question our assumptions. The words on its pages have the power, as Paul writes, to make us “new creations.” We read the Bible to figure out how to be more like Jesus today than we were yesterday, how to reflect the image of God inside us rather than distort it, how to do the “good work” we’ve been called to do. That, in short, is why we read the Bible.

We have to be careful not to succumb to the idea that reading the Bible is a goal to be marked off. Some people boast about reading the Bible cover to cover, sometimes more than once, and yet live their lives in a such a way that you wonder if any of those words sank in. Other people read the Bible every single day then say things and make decisions that go against who God is calling them to be. So when it comes to reading the Bible, the question is not “how much” but “how?” Are we reading it for information, formation, or transformation?

So I can’t tell you how often you should read the Bible or how much you should read at one time, but I can give you a guiding question that I hope will help you know how to read it. The Bible is not a self-help book, written to tell you how to be the best person you can be. The Bible is not a piece of evidence to be used to prove this point or that point about what’s right and what’s wrong. And the Bible is definitely not something that should be worshipped and idolized for the words on its pages. No, the Bible is first and foremost a revelation, a revealing to us of who God is and what God has to say to us.

Therefore, when we read a piece of scripture, the question to ask is, “What is God saying to me at this moment?” In other words, “What does God want me to know about God when I read this passage?” I do a daily online devotional on my phone each morning, and the devotion always has a piece of scripture with it. Asking these questions has transformed how I read those scriptures. Sometimes God speaks a word of comfort; other times, God speaks a word of challenge. But if I’m willing to ask the question, God is always speaking to me through the Bible.

And that's one of the things that makes the book so amazing to me. I can read the same passage two different times and get two different words from God. Take the Greatest Commandment: "Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." I read that one time and remember I'm supposed to love God with my mind, which means using my intellect in ways that honor God. I read it another time and I'm reminded that I'm supposed to love my neighbor, even if I don't always like my neighbor. And I read it a third time and am comforted by the fact that I'm supposed to love myself because God loves me. One passage, three meanings.

So reading the Bible can be transformational for us, and it doesn't a lot of effort or work to do. There are plenty of apps for your phone that will send you a Bible verse a day. I wonder how your life might be transformed if you read one verse a day and asked God, "What do you want me to hear from you today?" I bet your eyes might be opened to God's presence around you, your ears open to the ways God is speaking to you, your heart open to the love God wants to share with you. Reading scripture doesn't have to be daunting; it can be as simple as looking at your phone for ten seconds, something which I know most of us can do because I've seen you do it during my sermons.

God didn't stop speaking to us when the last words of Revelation was written. I believe God is still speaking to us today in a myriad of ways, including through the words of the Bible. That's why it's not a static book on a shelf. Instead, it's a dynamic, living document, speaking a new word to each generation about God's love, God's justice, God's inclusion, God's kingdom. And it's our responsibility, as Christians, to listen to what God is saying to us. We don't have to do that all at once. We can do it one day at a time, one verse at a time, one question at a time. How might God speak to you through the Bible if you stopped for a few seconds to read it?

We read the Bible to know God; and we read the Bible learn what to do; and we read the Bible to learn who we are called to be. The Bible is a great conversation partner for us on this journey of faith. I believe we should converse with it, complain to it, talk back to it, interrogate it, and disagree with it, not as an act of rebellion, but as an act of faith and trust. And ultimately, I believe we should let it change us, because our faith is called to be always asking, always seeking, always knocking. But the only way scripture can change our lives is if we read it.