

## “Spiritual Habits for Ordinary People - study”

Scripture: John 8:31-38

Graphics: study, books, creation

Big Truth: The people of the Panama UMC are called to study the bible and other sources in order to establish and strengthen our relationships to Jesus.

Focus Phrase: Study establishes and strengthens your relationship to Jesus' words.

### 1. Introduction

- A. PRAY!
- B. Spiritual Habits for Ordinary People. That's the title of this sermon series. We're in Week 2.
- C. In Week 1, we focused on the spiritual habit of prayer. This week, you've had the chance to establish or renew your habit of prayer. If you didn't get to Day 1, then today or tomorrow is another opportunity to establish THE MOST IMPORTANT spiritual habit God has given us ordinary people.
  - i. Set aside a time to start praying. Invite Jesus to sit with you and pray with you. Make an appointment with Jesus to meet Him the next day...and the next for the purpose of praying God's will.
  - ii. Build a spiritual habit of prayer because it's THE primary way God wants to communicate in relationship with His people.
- D. A habit is defined by Merriam-Webster as *an acquired mode of behavior that has become nearly or completely involuntary*.
- E. This series is all about how to start (or REstart) 5 new or renewed straight-forward spiritual habits for ordinary people like you and me, right away.
- F. And even though we are ordinary people, we are loved by an EXTRAORDINARY GOD who has reached down from heaven, sent His only Son, Jesus, who lived and then died for our sins, walked out of His own grave, and breathed HIS HOLY SPIRIT directly into EACH believer, so that we could carry on the ministry of Jesus today.
- G. And as followers of Jesus, we pray with Him. But we're also commanded to **learn** as much as possible about Him. Jesus wants us to **know** as much as we can possibly know about Him, so that we can be like Him and serve Him and center our lives on Him. To intentionally grow as His disciples.
- H. One of the challenges of becoming an adult and leaving the academic setting of high school or college behind is that we take a big breath and think, “Glad I don't ever have to learn anything ever again unless I want to.” And so many of us simply stop reading, stop observing, stop listening and learning.

- I. As followers of Jesus, however, there is **one** subject on which we never get a pass. There's **one** course we never get to drop. There's one professor that's never late for class. We're always enrolled and expected to attend class, no matter our stage of life.
- J. That course is, of course, **Jesus and his holy word**. And no matter how long it's been since you stepped foot in a classroom to LEARN (not teach or organize) but LEARN, you and I are expected by our Teacher to listen, look, learn, and live out what we learn.
- K. Learning is all about change. Learning about Jesus and God's love is all about changing you and me and the world to align with God's plan for it and us.
- L. If you're taking notes this morning, write this down, **"The Spiritual Habit of study is the process through which we establish and strengthen our relationship with Jesus and His word."**
- M. One way to do that is by studying books, which we'll get into. But it's not the ONLY way to study God's word and will.
- N. As I said last week, this series is based on a book by Richard Foster called *Celebration of Discipline*. And I also said that I was going to give away a copy of this book this morning. I'll save that until the end, so be ready!
- O. Let's dive into the second spiritual habit for ordinary people - **study**. Study establishes and strengthens your relationship to Jesus and the things that Jesus said and did. Study establishes and strengthens a direct line of relationship between the believer and the One in whom the believer believes.
- P. Proverbs 3:1-2 reminds us, "My child, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments; for length of days and years of life and abundant welfare they will give you."
- Q. Turn with me to John chapter 8, starting in verse 31. Some of Jesus' Jewish followers were asking some questions one day, and Jesus let them know that knowing the truth - studying and learning the truth about Him - was at the core of being His disciple.

## 2. Scripture

### A. READ John 8:31-38

- B. Richard Foster opens his chapter on study with this statement, "The purpose of the Spiritual Disciplines is the total transformation of the person. They aim at replacing old destructive habits of thought with new life-giving habits. Nowhere is this purpose more clearly seen than in the Discipline of study." (p62)
  - i. He goes on to reference the words of the Apostle Paul who wrote this to the church in Rome (Romans 12:2): "Do not be conformed to this world, but be

- transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”
- ii. In order to renew our minds, we have to apply our minds to those things - those subjects - that can transform them.
  - iii. Paul tells us what those things are in Philippians 4:8, “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”
  - iv. Foster writes, “*The Discipline of study is the primary vehicle to bring us to ‘think about these things.’ Therefore, we should rejoice that we are not left to our own devices but have been given this means of God’s grace for the changing of our inner spirit.*”
  - v. That changing of the inner spirit and the changing of our minds is the goal of the spiritual habit of study.
- C. That’s why, as we read in our text for today, Jesus challenged and corrected would-be Jewish disciples that were following him and trying to figure out how to be His disciples.
  - D. It’s important to note that Jesus was talking to, “...*Jews that had believed in him.*” These were followers...folks who liked Jesus and wanted to know more about what he had to say...they liked what he was DOING.
  - E. What they DIDN’T like was the fact that Jesus was accusing them of not being FREE...of somehow being slaves by not knowing the truth.
  - F. Jesus said, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples...” So far so good. I’m sure his listeners were nodding at this point.
  - G. “AND,” Jesus continued, “you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” Uh-oh.
  - H. Now, they could’ve ask Jesus more questions in order to learn what this truth was and what kind of freedom the truth provides. But, instead, they got all prideful and said, “Hey, we’re Abraham’s descendants! We’ve never been slaves to ANYONE!” (which we know isn’t true since they’d been slaves to the Egyptians, the Babylonians, and the Assyrians, but that’s beside the point.)
  - I. The POINT is that as soon as Jesus asked them to expand their minds by understanding something new and incredibly freeing about Him, they basically said, “We don’t need to know any of that, dude, because we know all we need to know...we’re Abe’s family.”
  - J. But, see, that’s just the thing. Everything Abraham and Moses and the prophets did and said, and the entire trajectory of the Old Testament, points TO JESUS. God’s plan was from the beginning...and it culminates in Jesus.

- K. When, in Deuteronomy 11:18, God said, “You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead,” He was preparing His people to someday welcome Jesus as THE WORD of God.
- L. Jeremiah 31:31-33, “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”
- M. Jesus was inviting them to study what he was saying...to study HIM...and then start thinking in a brand new way about God’s plan.
- N. And the invitation was to **continue in** (the Greek is *meno*) **my word** (the Greek is *logos*). From the first verse of John’s gospel, Jesus is the Word (*logos*) and the *logos* is Jesus, God’s *logos* made flesh as God was incarnated in human form in Jesus.
- O. So, **meno logos** (continue in my word...continue in ME, I’m taking some liberty with the Greek there) is Jesus’ command. And IF they would *meno logos*, then they were TRULY his disciples.
- P. And, if they *meno logos*, they would KNOW the TRUTH about God’s plan in Jesus, and that TRUTH would set them free from the old law and all its rules that couldn’t be kept, and, a new salvation would be theirs.
- Q. TRUTH is an interesting concept. (beach ball)
- i. The best way I can help us envision this is to hypothetically think of all the things that are TRUE to GOD. God KNOWS everything that is truly true. In your mind, put those God-Truths, as a set, into a gigantic beach ball. As God holds that beach ball (maybe God’s wearing a cool swim suit too), you can picture the God-truths inside the ball. Any concept or reality outside the ball is not true.
  - ii. Now, you and I and these would-be disciples know and believe many of the things INSIDE the ball. But, we also think and believe that some of the things outside the ball are true, even though God knows them NOT to be true. An example would be a statement like, “God sometimes doesn’t know what is hurting me.” Or, “God is limited.” “God can’t forgive me.”
  - iii. Now, none of the truths IN the ball are affected by the non-truths OUTSIDE the ball. BUT...BUT (whew!) EVERY non-truth OUTSIDE the ball (every lie of Satan) can be destroyed by the TRUTHS INSIDE the ball.

- iv. So, here's the plain point. In order for us to destroy the non-truths, half-truths, and false thinking about God and OURSELVES - those things outside the ball - we MUST study, learn and believe MORE of the truths INSIDE the ball.
- R. When we do, as Jesus commanded those disciples that day, then change happens, growth happens, FREEDOM from lies and untruths happens, and we become more and more like Jesus.
- S. But we MUST study God's truths and allow those to transform us by the renewing of our minds...
- T. The problem, as Jesus rightly identified in this group of disciples, is that they thought they knew it all. AND, because they were convinced that they were entitled to being free and secure in their heritage, which gave them all they needed, they didn't need to *meno logos*.
- U. Jesus simply replied to them, "I declare what I have seen in the Father's presence (Jesus know every truth inside that ball); as for you (who don't know everything inside the ball), you should do what you have heard from the Father.
- V. And to these Jews, that included Jeremiah 31 and Proverbs 3, and Psalm 101, which prays, "I will sing of loyalty and of justice; to you, O Lord, I will sing. I will **study the way that is blameless**. When shall I attain it? I will walk with integrity of heart within my house; I will not set before my eyes anything that is base."
- W. The Spiritual Habit of study is the process through which we establish and strengthen our relationship with Jesus and His word.

### 3. Application

- A. The purpose of study isn't just to fill your head with knowledge ABOUT Jesus. The purpose of building a HABIT of study is TO SET YOU FREE from the old thinking that has kept you in bondage to sin or apathy or lack of power in prayer and worship.
- B. If you're not in the habit of studying the word, how hard will it be to start establishing that habit? After 13 years of school, 4 years of undergraduate study, and 7 years of seminary, I'll be honest when I say that studying was the last thing I was interested in...and I still struggle with study like Foster describes it.
- C. He writes, "Study is the specific kind of experience in which through careful attention to reality the mind is enabled to move in a certain direction." (p63)
- D. Note that he doesn't say, grab every book you find and study because there will be a test for this. That's, obviously, not the aim, although there will be a judgment coming at the end of days.

- E. The study you do now will give you confidence now when you stand in the grace and mercy of God, through our unshakable faith in Jesus Christ.
- F. So how do ordinary people who follow Jesus establish a habit of study so that every disciple can experience this freedom?**
- G. Well, first, we need to know that there are **two different fields of study**. Certainly, books and verbal communication like lectures and sermons are important, but just as important are non-verbal sources. Let's briefly describe those.
- i. **Books and Lectures**
- a. Obviously, the most important book or text for us to be studying is the Bible. This is our primary concern. Our primary source.
  - b. I appreciate study guides and study noted, but we should be spending MOST of our time simply studying the bible.
  - c. And when I say 'study' I don't mean devotionally. When you study, it's **analytical**. Study is all about interpretation... what does the word or text mean. Devotions are important to understand application of the text... what it means for me, personally. Be careful not to rush to an application before you have taken some time to understand the interpretation through study.
  - d. Beside the Bible, there are COUNTLESS books that help with study. Our men's group uses a pretty simple study guide that walks us through the text - currently the book of Romans. Our women's group does similar things, along with our Sunday School classes.
  - e. But don't rely too much on class meetings, without time spent studying between gatherings.
  - f. And then pick up a classic texts from C.S. Lewis or Augustine or Wesley and read. I have a library in my office, and there's one in the Conference Room to borrow books.
  - g. Listen to podcasts and sermons from trusted sources. Ask and I can help.
- ii. What about those **Non-verbal sources**
- a. The other field of study is what Foster calls non-verbal books.
  - b. These are things like Creation itself. Relationships. Sounds. Things you can see or hear but that don't use words. Maybe this is music or society or culture.
  - c. Walking on the beach or out under the stars on a clear night will give you as much a sense about the Truth of God as a whole bunch of hours in a Bible study inside the building. Isaiah 55:12 says, "...the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands."

- d. I have a friend that spends A LOT of time in the woods simply observing and seeing and hearing and studying and keeping notes.
  - e. Look for the truth of God in nature, in a relationship, or a protest or a quiet funeral. God's TRUTH is there to see and experience.
- H. And once you're attuned to and paying attention to verbal and non-verbal sources, here how to establish and grow a spiritual habit of study:
- i. First is **Repetition** - find a time to read or listen or observe every day...several time throughout the day. Things that tell of God's truth are readily available through the words of Jesus and the world around us.
  - ii. While you do, **Concentrate** - we get so distracted so many times during the day. We read and watch TV at the same time. We listen to this or that sermon and try to wash dishes and laundry. Concentrate on the lesson before you, praying that the Holy Spirit will continue to give you focus.
  - iii. Then, practice **Comprehension** - it does no good to read or observe and concentrate if you don't learn the lesson the study is trying to teach you about God. That is the hard part. Understand what you're reading or seeing.
  - iv. And no study is complete unless you **Reflect** on what you've learned - Let your study change you. Free you. Hebrews 4:12 says, "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."
- I. Repetition, Concentration, Comprehension, and Reflection...all to change and grow closer to Jesus, which is God's desire for us.
- J. The Spiritual Habit of study is the process through which we establish and strengthen our relationship with Jesus and His word.

#### 4. Conclusion

- A. Speaking of study, who's ready for a book? Here's the useless trivia question: **What grade was I in when this book was published the first time?**
- B. **Bonus question: How many books of the bible are there?** (beach ball)
- C. **Ordinary people CAN do extraordinary things when an extraordinary God is involved in their ordinary lives.**
- D. We can pray powerful prayers. We can study life-changing, freeing words.
- E. Don't let anything get in the way of increasing a life of study of our extraordinary God and the Son He sent to save us, and the Spirit He sent to guide us in all things.

- F. Find time to, make a priority for, and then build a habit of **study**, verbal and non-verbal. Start with the Bible and then keep searching and knowing and growing.
- G. You WILL know the TRUTH and the TRUTH will set you free!
- H. Let's PRAY!