

- We are in week 2 of a new series called “Spiritual Development Practices”
- Most people in our church have a desire to intentionally grow in their spiritual development.
- There are practices that contribute to this and some of the practices are done in groups and some are done alone and some can be done either way.
- Last week we looked at prayer, and this week I want to look at another practice that contributes greatly to our spiritual development. This is the exercise of reading and interacting with the Bible.
- Just like with prayer, when we can talk about reading your bible, it can immediately induce large portions of guilt because most of us know we don’t do this as much as we think we should.
- That’s despite the bible being a fairly unusual book.
- Written on 3 continents by 40 authors over a period of 1500 years, containing history, poetry, songs, prophecy, liturgy, romance, mystery and more.
- If you read it aloud, you can do so in about 70 hours.
- Many kingdoms and rulers have tried to destroy it. Antiochus Epiphanes tried to destroy all of it 200 years before Jesus. Emperor Diocletian (284-316) killed anyone who did not surrender their Scriptures and were found out. Famous philosopher Voltaire in the 1700’s predicted bible would be done within 100 years. Yet here it is.
- It has been scrutinized, examined, lauded, criticized.
- The Harry Potter book series is the best selling book series in history, having sold more than 500 million copies worldwide, having been translated into 80 languages. Compare this to the Bible which has sold over 6 billion copies and has been translated all or partially into 3,350 languages. It is estimated that every day in the United States, more than 168,000 Bibles are either sold or given away.
- The average home has 4 copies, and almost every home has at least one. [TAKE OUT MY STACK OF BIBLES]
- I could go on and on. Many people want to grow, to know God more, to develop spiritually, yet largely ignore their bibles. [LAY THE BIBLE ON THE TABLE WITH THE SKILL SAW]
- A recent research study said that *“Even among worship attendees less than half read the Bible daily. The only time most Americans hear from the Bible is when someone else is reading it.”* (Scott McConnell, Lifeway Research)
- Why is that? What gets in the way of people reading their bibles? There are a multitude of reasons, but there are several that seem to rise to the top.
- It is difficult to understand – the bible was written long ago with an entirely different cultural context than we have. Many things that would have been clear are not clear to us. Wording can be tricky. Context matters and we can have difficulty with context. If it is really difficult to understand, we eventually stop.
- It can be overwhelming – especially to those who are new, they don’t know where to start. Do I start at the beginning? Do I read OT? NT? It’s just so . . . large. It can be quite daunting.
- I have gotten bored with it – if you have been doing it for a long time, you read the same things over and over. It gets humdrum. Feels like there is nothing more to learn. I encountered a man once who told me once that Sunday’s didn’t do much for him because he figured he had heard it all and learned it all. He had been a Christ-follower for about 10 years.
- This morning we have a whole range of people in this room. People who rarely read it, those who do occasionally, and those who do so regularly.

- A lot of us would like to read it more, understand it more, or have it impact their lives increasingly. The good news is that as has been said, the Bible is shallow enough for a child to wade in and deep enough for an elephants to swim in.
- So why does this matter? Why should we care? How does reading and interacting with my bible lead to the kind of spiritual growth I desire?
- **EVERY TIME I OPEN THE BIBLE I AM A HOLY SPIRIT MOMENT AWAY FROM ENCOUNTERING GOD.**
- Reading your bible is not a religious obligation that somehow makes you better.
- The bible is not just a book of moral commands (although it has them). On how to do more, live better, sin less (**B**asic **I**nstructions **B**efore **L**eaving **E**arth)
- It is not a collection of stories to entertain or inspire (although there are many of those).
- Every part of the bible is part of a larger story. The focus of that story is God. All the stories, laws, prophecies, songs point towards God.
- Consider the bible like this: Creation (Gen 1-2) – Fall (Gen 3) – Redemption (1,184)– Restoration (Rev 21-22)
- The bulk of this story centers on redemption, and on the lengths a loving creator would go to in order to bring his people back to himself.
- If we are going to have spiritual development from reading the bible, we must begin with the premise that it is all about it's divine author.

## I. Let the bible direct you to its divine author.

- There is a disturbing trend in some church circles that have elevated the Bible almost higher than the one who wrote it, but this is not new. In Jesus day, the religious leaders were tremendous bible scholars. They studied it. Memorized it. Analyzed it. Taught it. Yet listen to Jesus condemn them.

*John 5:37 And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, 38 nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent. 39 You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, 40 yet you refuse to come to me to have life.*

- The entire purpose of Scripture is to communicate to us who God is, what he is like, and what it means and looks like for us to live as his followers.

*Hebrews 4:12 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.*

- It is alive and active. It is not a textbook or religious journal. It is God's words to you. It is his expression of his heart. It reveals how he feels about you. It lays out his plans. **EVERY TIME I OPEN THE BIBLE I AM A HOLY SPIRIT MOMENT AWAY FROM ENCOUNTERING GOD.**
- That is why Scripture is so varied.
- There is theology and law that will appeal to the mind that loves argument, structure and logic.
- There is poetry and song that will appeal the heart of the artist.
- There are stories that stir the imagination and inspire.
- There is teaching that appeals to those that want to learn deeply.
- And on it goes.
- But all of them point to the one who is the focal point of it all – Jesus.
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- When you open your bible, you are being pointed towards Jesus. Towards the Spirit. Toward the Father.
- There is a second piece. If we want to grow through Scripture, if we want to develop spiritually, we must let it direct us to the divine author, but we must:

## II. Approach the bible with a commitment to living it.

- When Paul, who wrote much of the NT, was writing to a young man named Timothy about how to lead others, he expressed the important of being immersed in the Bible.  
*2 Timothy 3:14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, 15 and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*
- There is a huge impact available to each person.
- Make you wise – this is not knowledge. It is applied knowledge. It is practical, not just in your head.
- Teaching – you learn from it, see new things about you and about God.
- Rebuking – it allows God to point the spotlight into those areas of our lives where we need to repent. It can bring us up short.
- Correcting – steering us in a new direction, and can help us think, believe or act differently
- Training – gives us ways to live that will change the course of our lives. 95% of what I did and do as a spouse and parent comes directly from the training I receive from the Bible.
- Thoroughly equipped – for every good work. He will give us what we need. Not just a knowledge based thing.

*Example:*

*You are reading Matt 18 and you read a parable about a man who was shown mercy and forgiveness but did not show it to others. It concludes with v35 “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”*

- Your brain immediately begins thinking of someone who you are angry at. They have hurt you. They have acted unjustly to you. No excuses. And you feel the Spirit telling you that you need to forgive them. Let it go. Have a conversation and actually apologize for your part.
- Those that grow will do it. They will act on it. They will listen to the Spirit. They live it.
- Those who ignore it, make excuses, and just move on to another easier part of Scripture – those people will remain stuck.
- **EVERY TIME I OPEN THE BIBLE I AM A HOLY SPIRIT MOMENT AWAY FROM ENCOUNTERING GOD.**
- When you encounter him, you must be committed to living it out.
- So how do we do this?

## III. Ways to practice reading your bible.

- 1) Start with good translation.
- Pick a good translation – TNIV, NIV, NLT (they favor the receptor language, literal translations often leave gaps because they translate into language in way we would never read or speak today)
- 2) Have a plan – if you only do what you feel like that day, it will get old and you will miss big picture benefits. Read a chapter a day. Read a verse a day. Read a devotional – but don’t let the devotional substitute for the bible. There is no “right way”. The system of chapters we

have introduced in A.D. 1238 by Cardinal Hugo de S. Caro, while the verse notations were added in 1551 by Robertus Stephanus, after the advent of printing.

- 3) Change it up – just like our conversations with those we love aren't the same every time, adjust.
- If one way is not working, change. Don't stop reading – do it differently. Read aloud. Listen. Read one verse and put it front of you for an entire day.
- This is where discipline comes in – you need repetition. Discipline is the bridge over the gaps in our emotion.
- 4) Bring it home with good questions
- Paul Zazzo last year taught to ask this question: So what?
- What does this say about what I believe? About God? About me? About others?
- What does this say about how I live? Am I being invited to change? Act? Do something?

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- This is so important. I can't tell you how much these last two weeks will change your life. When you take prayer, trusting God and expecting him to show up and marry it up to reading God's word to encounter him and live in obedience to what he says, your life will utterly and completely change.
- The English ship Bounty, commanded by Lt. William Bligh, journeyed to the South Pacific in 1787. Many signed on considering the voyage a trip to paradise. Bligh appointed a young friend, Fletcher Christian, to the post of second in command. The Bounty stayed in Tahiti for 6 months and led by the happy go lucky Fletcher Christian enjoyed paradise to the fullest. On April 28, 1789, Fletcher Christian staged the most famous mutiny in history. He and his mutineers set Bligh and his supporters adrift in an overloaded lifeboat.
- The mutineers aboard the Bounty, led by Christian, returned to Tahiti, where they left some of the mutineers, kidnapped some women, took some slaves, and traveled with the remaining crew a thousand miles to uninhabited Pitcairn Island. There the little group unraveled. They distilled whiskey from a native plant. Drunkenness, disease, and murder took the lives of all men except for one. John Adams, a.k.a. Alexander Smith, found himself as the only man on the island surrounded by an assortment of women and children.
- Then an amazing change occurred. Smith found the Bounty's neglected Bible. As he read it, he took its message to heart, then began instructing the little community. He taught the colonists the scriptures and helped them obey its instructions. The message of Christ so transformed their lives that twenty years later, in 1808, when the ship Topaz landed on the island, it found a happy society of Christians living in prosperity and peace, free from crime, disease, murder --- and mutiny.

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- An encounter that could change your life. In small ways. In large ways.