

The Practices of the Christian Life – 1 - Meditation

Several years ago, A.W. Tozer wrote, “Read it much, read it often, brood over it, think over it, meditate over it—meditate on the Word of God day and night. When you are awake at night, think of a helpful verse. When you get up in the morning, no matter how you feel, think of a verse and make the Word of God the important element in your day. The Holy Spirit wrote the Word, and if you make much of the Word, He will make much of you. It is through the Word that He reveals Himself. Between those covers is a living Book. God wrote it and it is still vital and effective and alive. God is in this Book, the Holy Spirit is in this Book, and if you want to find Him, go into this Book.”

In our study of the Christian life, we come to the last section – the practices of the Christian life. In discipleship manuals and in books intended for new Christians, these practices are often taught first. I've decided to place them last because more often than not, people already know that these practices are necessary. Too often, what is missing in the Christian, is an understanding of the main idea, and how we are to reach that. For that reason, we began by considering the priority of the Christian life - to love God. We then saw the way this happens – the process of the Christian life is one of knowing God by living in his presence. We considered how it is that we can remain in God's presence by examining the position of the Christian life. Having done that, we spent some time describing what our posture ought to be when we live in God's presence.

With all that in place, we can now consider the practices of the Christian life. The practices of the Christian life are the practical habits or disciplines of the Christian life that we must give ourselves to. These habits nourish faith, keep us controlled by the Spirit, and are essential to communion with God. Without these practices we will fail to experience the Spirit's work of illumination, conviction or sanctification. We will not understand our position, experience the process or respond with the right posture. These practices are crucial to living in God's presence and so coming to know Him.

The key practices of the Christian life are the Word, prayer, the church, and discernment. We'll spend several weeks considering each. Today we consider the matter of meditation on the Word.

The word of God is of course central to knowing God and loving Him ultimately. The Bible is where God's fullest revelation takes place, and the Bible is entirely sufficient to bring us to full spiritual maturity. The power of the Word is unquestionable; how we respond to the Word is what makes the difference.

In the Bible, God calls for not mere partial attention or mental assent to the Word. The word God uses in connection with His Word is the word *meditation*.

Joshua 1:8 ⁸ *"This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success;*

Psalms 1:1-3 *Blessed is the man Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, Nor stands in the path of sinners, Nor sits in the seat of the scornful; ² But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night. ³ He shall be like a tree Planted by the rivers of water, That brings forth its fruit in its season, Whose leaf also shall not wither; And whatever he does shall prosper.*

Psalms 119:148 ¹⁴⁸ *My eyes are awake through the night watches, That I may meditate on Your word.*

Meditation is commended and commanded in the Bible, yet in the frenetic pace of the 21st century, it is being increasingly neglected.

What is meditation? Meditation is the careful intake of and reflective thought on the Word of God. Meditation is not simply hearing the Bible or reading the Bible. It is hearing or reading it in a specific way.

What does meditation entail?

1) Meditation requires reading or hearing with observant eyes or ears

Many of us have developed lazy reading habits. Today, because we process so much information, we are used to scanning pages quickly. This tends to make us unobservant of details. Meditation requires we read carefully, with attention to detail.

Likewise, we have also picked up lazy listening habits. We tune out so many sounds, that we listen with half an ear, not carefully examining statements, not reasoning carefully enough.

For us to read or listen carefully, we have to acknowledge that it requires effort. We cannot be passive about mediation. To truly understand God's mind and come to know Him, nothing less than an attitude of diligent searching is necessary.

***Proverbs 2:1-7** My son, if you receive my words, And treasure my commands within you, ² So that you incline your ear to wisdom, And apply your heart to understanding; ³ Yes, if you cry out for discernment, And lift up your voice for understanding, ⁴ If you seek her as silver, And search for her as for hidden treasures; ⁵ Then you will understand the fear of the LORD, And find the knowledge of God. ⁶ For the LORD gives wisdom; From His mouth come knowledge and understanding; ⁷ He stores up sound wisdom for the upright; He is a shield to those who walk uprightly; ;*

Our goal must be to observe all that God is saying in a passage. One of the best ways to encourage careful, observant reading is to frequently ask questions of the text.

- Who is saying this?
- Whom is it said to?
- What is being said?
- When and where was it said?
- Why was it said?
- How was it said? That is, what words were used? What word pictures? What is the tone of the passage? Is anything emphasised or repeated?

When we have asked these questions, our eyes or ears are sensitive, attentive and focused. We are not interested in importing into the Bible what we want to say, but to be as quiet as possible and as focused as possible to see exactly what God has said.

2. Meditation requires reflection on the meaning of the passage.

Once we know what the Bible says, we want to know what it means. To meditate is to take the time to understand. Once you have observed what the Bible says, you have to reflect on what it means.

We go from observation to interpretation.

Interpretation is where we go from 'what does it say' to 'what does this mean?' Everything is in God's Word for a reason. What is God saying in this passage?

Here we must pray and ask God to open our eyes and to give us understanding regarding our observations. However, we don't merely wait for some flash of revelation. We continue to ask questions of the text. We go from the who, what, where, when, and how questions to the *why* question. *Why* is this in God's Word? What does God want to teach through this? What question does this text answer? What theological points does this passage make? Why should I believe it or do it? Why is it important/ relevant?

If you have answered this question properly, you will know what the text means. You should emerge with a timeless principle that would be true for God's people of all times. If what you have come out with does not match the rest of Scripture, or has never been true for God's people, you've probably misinterpreted it. The Bible can never mean today, what it has never meant in the past. The applications may change, but the interpretation remains consistent.

From observation, to interpretation, we move to the third phase of mediation which is application.

3. Meditation requires submission to God's will with a desire to apply His Word.

James 1:19-25 ⁹ So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; ²⁰ for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God. ²¹ Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. ²² But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. ²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; ²⁴ for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. ²⁵ But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.

; **John 7:17** ¹⁷ "If anyone wants to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority.

The purpose of meditating on God's Word is not to amuse yourself or to clear your conscience. It is to engage the mind of Christ and be transformed by it. To meditate biblically is to wrestle with a text until you understand not only what it means, but how it applies to your life.

Once you have that timeless principle from God's Word, you need to meditate on how you can respond to that. Again, there are questions you can ask of a text to help you apply it.

- How should I think of God because of this truth?
- Is there a command to obey?
- Is there a warning to heed?
- Is there a promise to believe?
- Are there godly or ungodly examples to follow or avoid?
- How should the truth affect my relationships, work, school, driving, leisure activities, desires, goals, ambitions, priorities, plans, emotions, attitudes, motives, speech, non-verbal communication, habits, lifestyle, schedule? You know that you have thought the application through if you can fit it into say, 2:30 on a Tuesday afternoon, and have some idea of how it would look then.

However, we do not simply want observation, interpretation, and application. We also want retention.

4) Meditation requires a desire to retain the Word until it changes our lives.

When Paul told Timothy to meditate on the things Paul was writing, he gave him a test to know when Timothy's meditation had been effective.

1 Timothy 4:15 ¹⁵ *Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all.*

Timothy was to meditate on Paul's words until his progress was evident. He was to meditate on God's Word until it made a noticeable difference in his life. He was to meditate until his obedience became not just sporadic, but continuous enough to count for a change in his character. Meditation becomes effective, not simply because we have great moment of insight while listening to a sermon, or reading the Word, but because we take those with us. We spend time contemplating the Word even when we are not sitting down in front of it. To do this, we must memorise it.

Memorization is the committing of Scripture to memory so as to recall the exact words of God. This is crucial because God illuminates His actual words, not merely vague ideas connected with His Word.

Memorisation therefore reflects the fact that you believe the very Word of God is living and powerful.

Psalms 119:11 ¹¹ *Your word I have hidden in my heart, That I might not sin against You!*

Psalms 119:55 ⁵⁵ *I remember Your name in the night, O LORD, And I keep Your law.*

Psalms 119:93 ⁹³ *I will never forget Your precepts, For by them You have given me life.*

Psalms 119:176 ¹⁷⁶ *I have gone astray like a lost sheep; Seek Your servant, For I do not forget Your commandments.*

When you think about it, probably most Christians in history have not had their own personal copy of the Bible in their laps to read. What did they do? They memorized the Word. They took it with them in their minds. Having heard it, they took it with them to their fields, to their desks, to their places of work and ruminated over it.

How do we become better at memorising the Word?

There are many things in life we memorise. In fact, if we didn't, we would not function well. We remember our names, our date of birth, and the way to get home, the faces of people we know, the way to do our jobs and so on.

The key to memorisation is twofold:

1) A desire to remember (importance)

The more you love something, the easier it is to remember. If you want to remember something, you often write it down. You concentrate. So it must be with the Word of God.

2) Frequency of use of the information (repetition).

You end up remembering your telephone number, your ID number, and the many names of people you know because of how often you use those bits of knowledge. So it is with the Bible. To memorise Scripture you must write it down, read it often, say it out loud, repeat it again and again to yourself.

For a Christian, there are some things that are crucial to memorise:

- 1) The names and the order of the books of the Bible. There is no reason for Christians saved for years to be fumbling around their Bibles to find verses.
- 2) Verses connected with the plan of salvation. Since every Christian needs to share the gospel, it is vital that every Christian be able to refer to important verses that teach the gospel.
- 3) Important theological verses. For example, for each of the messages we have considered on the Christian life, there is at least one verse that could summarise the teaching. This helps one grasp key truths. The same could be said for sermons you hear.
- 4) Verses which become particularly applicable for a sin you are fighting, a promise you need to hold tightly to etc. When you are seeking some very specific way to change sin in your life, it is important that you have the Word of God ringing in your ears as you do so.

Observation, interpretation, application and retention are the four marks of meditation on the Word.

Although our primary source of meditation is to be the Word of God, there are other things that a Christian should read or hear, which further fuel becomes for meditation. These would include:

- Reading the sermons or explanations of passages of Scripture by sound Bible teachers. Today, through publishing and through the Internet, the Christian has more sermons available to him than at any time in Christian history. While we must be careful of overload, it is important to be exposed to choice expositions of Scripture.
- Reading the devotional classics of the church, like Tozer's *The Pursuit of God*, Augustine's *Confessions* and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. The classics have deeply affected Christians through history, and with good reason.
- Reading Christian biography and history. When we read of the lives of individual Christians, or of the church at large, we see God's grace at work. We are encouraged, and challenged; we see how other Christians responded to trials. We see what disciplines they included. We see how God used them and answered their prayers.
- Reading theology. Theology is understanding God's revelation of Himself in a systematic fashion. To read theology is to see how God has blessed men with good minds that can reason, order, arrange, and harmonise the biblical material into systems of belief. Theology is not just for professional theologians. Every Christian should tackle some theology at some point.
- Reading books on Christian growth. There are some good resources on spiritual growth and the Christian life which, if absorbed, will help you in your walk with Christ.
- Reading helpful topical books written by a trusted author can be helpful for a particular area you may be interested in. We have no lack of specialisation today, and somewhere in the Christian world, there is bound to be someone who has focussed on a particular topic. Make sure it is a trustworthy source, though, because for every good book, there are about twelve unhelpful and deceptive ones.
- Reading the best classical literature and poetry, which help shape the Christian affections. When

we read literature and poetry that emerged from Christian imaginations, it helps us to rightly imagine the Scriptural ideas that we deal with.

Philippians 4:8 ⁸ *Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy -- meditate on these things*

How could a Christian who is not a full-time student of God's Word find the time to do so much reading? John Piper has pointed out that if you read slowly – say 200 words a minute- you can still read much. At that rate, fifteen minutes a day for one year, will equal 1 095 000 words or around 3041 pages – or 10 very substantial books in one year. It is possible, we just have to switch off the TV, put away the Smartphone, get rid of Facebook, switch off the iPod now and then and take the time to read.

Meditation: A key practice of the Christian life that is being drowned out in modern Christianity. However, if we are to reach the priority of the Christian life – loving God, we will have to know God. We will only know God if we commune with Him in His presence with the right posture. We will only do that if we are meditating on His Word.