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The Mission
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Lesson 6

So last week we learned the first four of ten strategies to help you better understand and make better observations of what you read. And they were to read thoughtfully, to read repeatedly, to read patiently and to read selectively. And we explained in detail what those strategies entailed and also I gave you several exercises to do to help you put into practice those strategies.

And just out of curiosity; did anybody do any or all of those exercises?

Anybody want to share with the class what they learned?

Now, the next strategy in learning to better read and understand Scripture is to read the Bible prayerfully.

I think a lot of times we tend to think of Bible study and prayer as two separate disciplines, but the fact is, they're closely related. In fact, prayer is really a key to effective Bible study. Learning to pray before, and during and even after you read the Scriptures is very important.

And it's especially crucial when you come to a place in your study where you're stuck or confused or both. Those are always a good time to stop and carry on a conversation with God. And just be honest and say, "Lord, I can't make any sense out of this passage or I don't understand it, so please help me!

Now, I know that a lot of people also struggle when it comes to prayer. And if you're one of those then let me give you a couple of suggestions. One

is something you don't need to do and the other is something you need to do:

The first one is not to try and imitate other Christians.

If you listen too much to the prayers of other believers, you're just going to end up praying like they do and more than likely you're going to only pick up all the clichés and all the lingo that a lot of Christians use just because somebody else uses it. Without question, Christians should pray corporately. But that doesn't mean they should all pray identically.

In fact, there are two groups of people who can teach you the most about praying. The first group is children. When children pray it's raw and it's real and it's received by God as well as any prayer that could ever be prayed.

I know some churches when they come together they all join in and pray the Lord's Prayer and they do that week in and week out. And I guess that's okay. But what a difference when a four-year-old talks to God whether it's before a meal or at bedtime. And you can be assured God is listening very close.

The other group we can learn from is new converts. They've not learned all the cliché's and jargon.

The author of our textbook told about a man in his church who recently been saved and he decided to show up for Wednesday night prayer meeting and Bible study. He said, after the Bible study, they broke into groups for prayer.

And on their way to a room to pray, this new convert told the group he was with he had a problem. When they asked what it was? He said, "I don't know how to pray." He said, "I can't say it the way you guys say it."

Well, somebody said, that's not a problem. In fact, you ought to thank God you don't pray like others pray.

And so they began to pray and when it came his time, He said, "Lord, this is Jim. I'm the one that met You last Thursday, remember?" And then he said, "And Lord I'm sorry I can't say things the way the rest of these guys say it, but I sure do love You. I really do. And hopefully, after I know You awhile longer, I'll be able to say that to you a lot better. And then he closed with a thanks a lot Lord, I'll see you later."

While everyone else was using the right terminology and saying their prayers as usual, this man was talking to God. And without realizing it, he was way ahead of the rest of them because he was being genuine and honest. And the truth is, that's the only thing that will ever move the Lord to hear our prayers. And so we need to learn to talk to God.

Also we don't need to be afraid to remind God of what He's promised. We need to repeat His promises to us back to Him. In tother words we need to claim the promises of God.

A good example of a prayer like that is found in the book of Nehemiah. It begins in chapter 1 and verse 4 and it goes through verse 11.

Now, to set the context, Nehemiah if you'll remember is a high ranking Jewish official in the Babylonian court. And when messengers arrive and tell him that his hometown, Jerusalem, is in really bad shape and that its' walls are broken down, and its' people are in distress, well, Nehemiah goes to his knees.

His first response is to pray. And that's the first lesson we ought to learn. At the first sight of trouble, we ought to pray. We don't need to wait until things look hopeless. Right away, we need to pray.

And then as Nehemiah prays, the first thing he does is to adore God:

He says, in **verse 5, “I pray, Lord God of heaven, O great and awesome God, You who keep Your covenant and mercy with those who love You and observe Your commandments,**

He brags on God. Before he ever gets to anything else, Nehemiah glorifies God.

Now, is that the way we pray? Probably not, most of the time. Most of the time we’re going go straight to the problem. Lord, I need this; or Lord I need that; and I need it now; or I need it yesterday.

And then after Nehemiah glorifies God, then he moves to confess his sin; and not only his own sin, but also the sin of his people as well.

In verse 6 he says, please let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open, that You may hear the prayer of Your servant which I pray before You now, day and night, for the children of Israel Your servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel which we have sinned against You. Both my father’s house and I have sinned. 7 We have acted very corruptly against You, and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses.

So he moves from adoration to confession. And that’s what adoration will do. When we understand and recognize the holiness of God, that will always lead to a recognition of our sin. When we fill our minds up with who God is, then our true condition will come to light.

And then he concludes by reminding God of His promises and then claiming the promises of God:

In verse 8 Remember, I pray, the word that You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations; 9 but if you return to Me, and keep My

commandments and do them, though some of you were cast out to the farthest part of the heavens, yet I will gather them from there, and bring them to the place which I have chosen as a dwelling for My name.’ 10 Now these are Your servants and Your people, whom You have redeemed by Your great power, and by Your strong hand. 11 O Lord, I pray, please let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants who desire to fear Your name; and let Your servant prosper this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.”

Nehemiah says, Lord, remember what You promised? Well, now I’m asking You to do it! I’m asking you to make good on Your promise.

And there’s a great lesson in that. We can always pray on the basis of the promises of God. And the reason is because of Who made them. If God promised it, then He’ll do it.

I could tell you, “I’m going to give you a million dollars if you do so and so. But that promise is only good if I can make good on it and I’m trustworthy enough to follow through with it.

Well, I might be trustworthy but I don’t have a million dollars to give you and so that promise would be no good.

But if God makes that promise He has the cattle on a thousand hills and so that’s a promise He could keep and would keep if He made it. And so it makes a difference on who’s making the promise.

And so if you want to learn how to pray, then just follow Nehemiah’s lead. Begin with adoration. Then move to confession and then remind God of His promises.

And I’ve listed ten of those promises in this lesson.

Now, I'm not going to go through them, I'm going to leave that for you to do as part of your homework for this week.

1. God promises to accomplish his purposes through his Word.

[My word] shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:11)

2. God promises to grow you in holiness through his Word.

Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. (John 17:17)

3. God promises the gift of faith through his Word.

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.
(Romans 10:17)

4. God promises to keep his Word.

I will not violate my covenant
or alter the word that went forth from my lips. (Psalm 89:34)

5. God promises to be with you as you read his Word.

...for [God] has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5)

6. God promises to direct your way through his Word.

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. (Psalm 119:105)

7. God promises to attend to those who are humble before his Word.

But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word. (Isaiah 66:2)

8. God promises his Spirit will guide you in the truth of his Word.

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. (John 16:13)

9. God promises to search your heart by his Word.

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)

10. God promises to help you as you read his Word.

He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Romans 8:32)

Another help would be to read Psalm 119. It's the longest psalm in the Bible with more verses (176) than any other chapter in the Word of God. And every one of them has something to say about the Word of God—either about its purpose, or its benefits or its value. And so I highly recommend you study it in detail.

And so when it comes to Bible study, there's nothing more important than prayer and I can't stress that enough.

Next it helps to read with an imagination.

Most people think that reading the Bible is boring. In fact, the only thing more boring some people think would be listening to someone read from the Bible or teach from the Bible. But I think the reason the Bible seems so dull to so many, is because we come to it dully.

For instance, how many times have you been in a Bible study group or in Sunday school and the leader says, "Okay everybody turn in your Bibles to 1 Kings chapter 2." And the teacher waits until everybody finds their place, which can sometimes take a while.

And then the teacher says, “OK, we’re going to read this passage together. Jim, why don’t you start with verse 1. And then Suzy, you take verse 2, and we’ll just work our way around the room until we’ve read the entire chapter.”

So Jim starts in, but he’s not a real good reader, and on top of that he has a King James Version with all the thees and thous. And so he’s stumbling and fumbling trying to make his way through this one verse and by the time he’s done, everybody else is nearly out cold.

Then Suzy takes her turn and she’s got one of these really modern translations, and so nobody else can follow along and by the time she gets through verse two, everybody’s real good and lost.

And then Joe goes next and he didn’t sleep well the night before and he starts reading from II Kings instead of 1 Kings. And by the time it’s all over, nobody has the foggiest idea of what the passage said, much less what it means or the application.

But now contrast that with somebody who has a background in say theater. And he takes a scripture and assumes the role of a biblical character. Maybe he puts on makeup and a costume and then he tells the story in the first person of the character he’s portraying.

And by the time he’s finished, those in his class are not only entertained, they were also instructed. Why? Because he used his imagination.

Now, not everybody has a background in theatre or went to acting school or even has that level of imagination. But there are things we can do to make the Bible not only easier to understand, but make it come alive. Because it is alive. It’s not some ancient out of date literature that has no bearing on our lives today.

And so that needs to be one of our prayers when come to the scriptures, that God would help us to crawl into the skin of the people we're studying—and to see through their eyes, and to feel with their fingers, and to understand with their hearts, and to know with their minds.”

If we would do that, then the Word of God would become alive like never before.

And so here a few suggestions for how to read God's Word imaginatively.

One, and we've mentioned this one before and we'll mention it again later; is to use different translations and paraphrases.

Another way is if you know a language other than English, you could read a translation of the Bible in that language.

Another way is to have someone read the text out loud or listen to the Bible on audio and we've talked about that one as well.

Another thing that might help you is to vary your setting or the place where you study.

I'm a firm believer in the value of having a set time and place to study the Scriptures. But if you want to stir up your imagination, then you might try changing your environment and read and study in a different place than your normal place. Maybe go out in the yard or on the front porch or climb a tree.

The seventh strategy to becoming a first-rate reader of the Bible is maybe the hardest for most of us and that's to read the Bible meditatively.

In other words, learn to reflect on it. And that's hard, because most of us living in the “laser lane.” In the old days, if people missed the stagecoach

they'd say, "Well, that's OK. We'll just catch it next month." But today, if we miss the elevator our day is ruined.

And because of fast paced lifestyles, meditative Bible reading is pretty much non-existent among most Christians. In fact, there's an old hymn titled, "Take Time to Be Holy." The Methodists I think used to sing it, but most of them don't sing it anymore and hardly nobody knows what it means to take the time to be holy. I won't sing it for you. I'll spare you that pain, but the first verse goes something like this.

Take time to be holy, speak oft with thy Lord;

Abide in Him always, and feed on His Word.

Make friends of God's children, help those who are weak,

Forgetting in nothing His blessing to seek.

Most of us have probably never heard that song, and probably even fewer practice that truth. But it is true, holiness will only come if we're willing to spend time with the Lord. And to learn God's word and really understand what it means, takes time.

You can get on a computer and instantly "download" a lot of things, but holiness is not one of them. Holiness takes time; time spent with God in His word.

And so that's why the Scriptures speak so frequently about meditation. In fact, I want to give you five scriptures for you to look up and read this week and think about in that regard. The first one is:

Joshua 1:8

Proverbs 23:7

Psalm 1:1–2

Psalm 119:97

Psalm 19

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Exercise 1

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If you are not in the habit of reading the Bible meditatively, here's a suggestion to get started: Set aside a day when you can get away from your routine—no work, no interruptions, no commitments. Perhaps you have a favorite spot in the country or by the seashore, or access to a lake house. Wherever it is, find a place where you can spend several hours alone.

Devote your time to meditating on John 4:1–42, the account of Jesus visiting Samaria. Begin by asking God to help you gain insight into His Word and show you how to apply it. Then read the passage several times. Use the suggestions for repeated Bible reading in chapter 9.

Examine the sections before and after John 4 to place it in context. Then look carefully at the passage to answer such questions as: Who are the people in this story? Who were the Samaritans? Why was it unusual for Jesus to talk to this woman? What was the reaction of her neighbors? Of the disciples? What does Jesus tell them when they return? What lessons does this passage teach about telling the gospel story to others?

After you've got a grasp of the story, think about what implications it might have for you. For instance, what kinds of people do you normally stay away from? Why? How would those people respond to the gospel? Is there anything you could do or say that would help them come closer to Christ and ultimately to trust in Him? When it comes to evangelism, are you a sower or a reaper (vv. 36–38)? Or neither? With which of the characters in the story do you most identify? Why?

How did you come to faith in Christ? Who told you about Jesus? What was your response? Whom have you told about Jesus? What did you say? What was the response? Are there principles in this story that you could use the next time you tell people about Christ?

You can come up with additional questions. The goal is to chew on the Word, looking for insights, and to examine yourself, looking for ways to apply Scripture. Be sure to write down everything you observe in the passage, as well as your conclusions. And spend time in prayer. On the basis of what you've studied and meditated on, what is God telling you? What do you need to tell Him? Where do you need His resources and help? What opportunities for evangelism would you like Him to open for you?