

Our theme for Lent this year is Spring Training, getting in shape spiritually by strengthening our spiritual disciplines and our relationship with the Lord. As I noted two weeks ago, one of the essential spiritual disciplines is establishing a daily quiet time where you spend time alone with God in prayer and reading His Word. Last Sunday, we discussed how important prayer is to our personal relationship with the Lord.

This morning let's look at the second element of a daily quiet time – reading and studying God's Word. You know, occasionally you can find a biblical message in some of the recent movies, that is, if you look hard enough. In the past, I have mentioned a movie that was filmed near Deming, New Mexico, in 2010 entitled *The Book of Eli* starring Denzel Washington. In a world after a nuclear war, there is only one Bible left, and Eli has it, and he is on a mission to take it to a place where it can be used to make a difference in a world in chaos.

Now what grabbed my attention in this movie was that we don't know how precious something is until we don't have it anymore. With all the blessings of life that we enjoy, we tend to overlook one of the greatest gifts that God has given us, and that is His Word, the Bible. We tend to take the Bible and its availability for granted. Following the reading of the scripture during worship, you will often hear the person say: "God's Word for God's people; thanks be to God." The question for us this morning is – do we really mean it; are we truly thankful for this wonderful instruction manual for living the Christian life that God has given us? And more importantly, are we using it or is it just gathering dust on a shelf somewhere in our home?

Maybe we should all be like Vigil Howard, a professor I had for classes on the Old and New Testaments when I went to summer school at the Perkins Theological Seminary in Dallas. Vigil came home one evening very upset. His wife asked him what was wrong. He told her that someone had stolen his Bible with all his notes in it. To which she replied: "Well, don't you keep it in your car?" To which Vigil replied: "Oh, they took that too." Vigil's Bible was more important to him than his car or any possession that he had; is the same true for us?

In his second letter to his protégé Timothy, the Apostle Paul's gives us guidance on how to use the Bible in the second chapter, verses 14 through 16.

Read 2 Timothy 2:14-16

The *Message* paraphrases verse 15 as follows: "Concentrate on doing your best for God, work you won't be ashamed of, laying out the truth plain and simple." The *New English Bible* translates the verse like this: "Try hard to show yourself worthy of God's approval as a laborer who needs not be ashamed; be straight forward in your proclamation of the truth."

While it is not necessary that you have a theology degree from a seminary before you can serve God effectively, it is a fact that God places no premium on ignorance. Ignorance of the Bible is ignorance of Jesus Christ. Billy Graham once said that if you are ignorant of God's Word, you will also be ignorant of God's will. I don't know how many times I have yelled at the TV when someone on *Jeopardy* can't answer a simple question on the Bible. In this passage, the Apostle Paul is emphasizing to Timothy and to us today the importance of presenting ourselves to our heavenly Father as competent workers who are skilled at doing the work of the kingdom. The word that Paul uses for "to present" means "to present oneself for service."

The words of this passage emphasize maturity, skill, and competence in the service to our God. Paul is appealing to Timothy's sense of pride in personal accomplishment when he says: "A worker who has no need to be ashamed." Have you ever seen a potter or an artist who was ashamed of their work? Are you ashamed of your knowledge of the Bible or are you confident based on your daily Bible reading and studies.

In the King James Bible, verse 15 reads: "Study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." The Greeks had three meanings of the term "to rightly divide." They used it for driving a straight road across country; for ploughing a straight furrow across a field; and for a mason cutting and squaring a stone so that it fits into its correct position in the building. So, the person who rightly divides the word of truth drives a road straight through the truth and refuses to be lured down unrelated paths or misguided directions; he ploughs a straight furrow across the field of truth; and he takes each section of the truth, and fits it into the correct position as a mason does a stone allowing no part to assume an undue place and thus knock the whole structure or life out of balance. In other words, he interprets it correctly and does not include his own personal opinions or biases.

So, how well do you know the Bible? If I asked you right now to name all sixty-six books of the Bible, could you do it? Could you name even half of them? If I asked you to find the books of Amos and Jude in the Bible, could you? When I was a growing up in a small Methodist Church in South Carolina, we often had sword drills. We called it a sword drill because in Ephesians 6:17 Paul calls the Word of God the sword of the Spirit. Have any of you ever participated in a sword drill? You place your Bible in front of you; someone calls out a Bible verse and then says "charge." The first person to find the passage steps forward and reads it. One of the secrets is to have a well-read Bible where the pages don't stick together. Would any of you be willing to participate in a sword drill? When I was in Grants, my Baptist friends laughed at us Methodists for having to place the page number for Bible passages in the bulletin. A recent Pew Research Study found that only 46 percent of the participants could name the four Gospels. Can you?

According to the Barna Research group, almost two of every five adults (38 percent) believe that the entire Bible was written several decades after Jesus' death. Amazingly, ten percent of adults believe that the name of Noah's wife was Joan of Arc. Forty-nine percent believe that money is the root of all evil when it is really the love of money. Other surveys revealed that people do not know even half of the Ten Commandment, do not know who preached the Sermon on the Mount, do not know the story of Jonah and the fish, and believe the expression "God helps those who help themselves" is a direct quote from the Bible when in reality it was penned by Benjamin Franklin in the late 1700s. When asked what are the epistles, someone replied: "They were the wives of the apostles." Some people also believed that Habakkuk is a disease of the lower back, instead of an Old Testament prophet. Do you see yourself in any of these answers?

Do you want to become a better servant of the Lord; do you want to grow in your knowledge of Him and His Son Jesus Christ; do you want the Bible to become your best friend? Let me give you three steps for becoming a skilled worker for the Lord. First, we need to read the Bible regularly, not just following along with me on Sunday morning on the screen. You might also want to start bringing your Bible to church to follow along. As we discussed two weeks ago, we should spend time alone with God every day listening to what He has to say to us through His Word. It's amazing how many of us can't start our day without checking the internet, television, or our smart phone, but never take time to sit down with God's Word. Which one do you think has the most truth in it, or will make you feel better about the day ahead?

Charles Spurgeon, a great English preacher, said that a Bible that is falling apart usually belongs to someone who is not. In the movie *The Book of Eli*, Eli is asked if he has a copy of the Bible, to which he replied: "Yes, but it is worn; however, it still works!" In the same way, the length of time we spend in reading and studying God's Word determines how deeply we get into it and how deeply it gets into us. The more time we spend in God's Word, the stronger we become. Unfortunately, it is also true that the person who only occasionally samples the Word of God never acquires a taste for it.

Dwight L. Moody said that when he prayed, he was talking to God; but when he read the Bible, God was talking to him, and it was more important for God to speak to him and for him to listen.

Second, we need to read the Bible with the expectation that we will learn something; that God will speak to us through the words. Often Jesus ended His parables and teachings with the saying: "He, who has ears, let him hear." God can and will speak to us if we will only listen. I can re-read the same biblical passages that I have read all my life and learn something new every time. The Bible is a living document; it speaks to us. It is a roadmap for life and a tool for getting through each day: those that are joyful and those that are disasters. Ronald Reagan

said: "Within the covers of the Bible are the answers for all the problems men face." The Psalmist said it best in Psalm 119:105 – "Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet."

Third, we should study the Bible so that we can become the person that God wants us to be. James 1:22 states: "Do not merely listen to the Word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." The *Message* paraphrases this verse as follows: "Don't fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other. Act on what you hear!" The Bible was not given to us to increase our knowledge, but to change our lives. Other books are given for our information; the Bible was given for our transformation. You can read the Bible and should, but until you study it, it doesn't come alive to you. If you are not participating in a weekly Bible Study right now and want to grow closer to the Lord, I encourage you to find one and get involved.

Knowledge without application is useless. We need to take what we learn and apply it to our daily life. However, for some people, it's easier to make the application to others. One pastor became acutely aware of this when a church member consistently told him after each worship service: "You sure preached to them today." The pastor dreamed of someday hearing this woman take the message personally. He thought that he had finally gotten his chance when one Sunday a severe snow storm prevented all but the pastor and this woman from showing up. After the message he knew she couldn't quote her standard remark. She didn't; instead, she said: "Too bad they weren't all here, because you sure preached to them today." The first priority of Bible study is personal application and transformation.

One day years ago, a teenager went off to college. His mother, worried about him, gave him a Bible and printed a verse of scripture on the flyleaf. The young man soon discovered college life to be a series of parties in which he spent his money on whiskey; he even had to pawn his Bible for more money. Nevertheless, he eventually made it through college and medical school and later became a doctor at a large hospital.

One day Dr. Mackay was treating a patient who knew that he was dying and asked for "his book." After the man passed away, Dr. Mackay noticed the man's "book" among his personal effects. He couldn't believe his eyes; it was the very same Bible that his mother had given him years before, with his name and the scripture verse still on the flyleaf.

He retreated to his office and began pouring over the book. Several hours later he knelt and asked Jesus Christ to be his Lord and Savior. Dr. William P. Mackay later became a minister and wrote an old gospel song that we will sing in a moment entitled "Revive Us, Again." The power of God's Word can and will change lives!

Charles Spurgeon also said that nobody ever outgrows the Bible; the book widens and deepens with our years. And that is one of the things that has fascinated me over the years. You know

you can read a book and the subject matter and characters will always remain the same, and you will always have the same ending. But not so with the Bible; it changes and evolves as we go through the experiences and situations of life. I can read a scripture verse today that I have read hundreds of times over the years, and I will continue to find new meanings and applications for my daily life as the situations in my life change. As things happen in my life, God opens the Bible up to me in new ways to help me navigate the highway of life. Saint Augustine said: "The Bible was composed in such a way that as beginners mature, its meaning grows with them."

As long as I can remember I have had a Bible in my hands. I have read it from cover to cover, but it is still a mystery to me; it still inspires me. I will never completely understand it because it is inspired by a far greater wisdom than me – the love of God. But that doesn't stop me from reading it every morning. I cannot get through a day without the Word of God; it is my security blanket. Do I practice what it says correctly; no, but I try. I love the Bible; it is one of my best friends. I can't do without it, and I hope that you feel the same way. Make the Bible your daily companion; you will never regret it.

God's Word for God's people; thanks be to God! Amen