

CHAPTER 1

EXERCISE #1: MEDITATING ON GOD'S WORD

Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly...

Colossians 3:16

If I were the devil (please no comment), one of my first aims would be to stop folk from digging into the Bible. Knowing that it is the Word of God ... I should do all I could to surround it with the spiritual equivalents of pits, thorn hedges and man traps, to frighten people off.¹

J.I. Packer

Conversion is about turning from our idols to the Living God (1 Thess. 1:9). The Living God graciously gives us a new heart for Him and his living Word. In other words, our desires change when we become Christians. Peter says that when new birth happens we begin to crave Scripture like a baby craves milk (1 Pet. 1:22-2:2). So we don't "have to read Scripture." We get to read Scripture. We want to read Scripture. No one should tell me "You have to kiss your wife, don't you?" No. I get to. I love her.

I didn't always crave Scripture because I didn't become a Christ-follower until I was in college. Before that time, I had no desire for the Word. I remember leaving for college and listening to my mom saying, "Take your Bible with you." I replied, "Why?" She said, "You might read it one day." But I didn't open that Bible until I was a Sophomore when God radically changed my life. Soon after, I purchased a massive study Bible, and began reading the Bible like crazy. Prior to this, I had a reading problem. I

¹ J.I. Packer, "Foreword" in *Knowing Scripture*, R.C. Sproul (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1977), 9.

couldn't remember anything I read in books. I was getting tutored in reading! But when I became a Christian, everything changed. I couldn't get enough of the Word. I believed in its power. God gave me the ability to retain what I read and began transforming my mind. I even wrote on the outside edges of my Bible, "It's alive!" And it is. And if we are going to have a living faith, then we need to consume the living Word.

The appropriate place for us to begin a study on how a Christian grows up, then, is by considering how to develop the discipline of meditating on the Word of Christ. Surely Donald Whitney is correct in saying, "No spiritual discipline is more important than the intake of God's Word."²

In this chapter I'm going to refer to "meditating on Scripture" broadly. Later I will talk about "meditation" in a specific sense. But for now, think of meditating on Scripture as a way to describe the act of thinking on God's Word – through exercises such as *reading it, praying it, studying it, hearing it, and memorizing it*.³ To say it another way, meditation on Scripture is the act of *filling your mind with the Word of God*. In contrast to some Eastern religions, where meditation is about emptying your mind, Christian meditation is about filling the mind with divine truth.

The need for meditating on Scripture is communicated in a number of places in Scripture. Paul urged the Colossians, "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly" (Col. 3:16). That is, live in the Word, like it's your spiritual house. Abide in it. Let it saturate your soul. Let it affect you through and through.

² Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1991), 28.

³ In chapter 4, I will discuss the need to meditate on God's Word by *discussing it* with others in Gospel-centered fellowship.

Jesus says a similar thing with the vine and branches analogy in John 15. He tells his disciples to “abide in the vine” or “abide in Him” because apart from union and communion with Him they (and we) can produce no spiritual fruit. But Jesus never tells us *how* to “abide” specifically. But I think he gives us a clue in verse 7, where he says, “If you abide in me, and my *words* abide in you” (emphasis added). D.A. Carson says, Jesus is “getting at the same truth,” that is, we commune with Jesus by abiding in his *words*.⁴ Abiding in Jesus entails a growing absorption of his teaching, which leads to fruitful living. Carson says, “Such words must so lodge in the disciple’s mind and heart that conformity to Christ, obedience to Christ, is the most natural (supernatural?) thing in the world.”⁵

The belief that you need to meditate on the Word of Christ continually stems from some important theological convictions. A primary conviction is that the Word and Spirit are the primary means God uses to shape us into the image of Christ. This is the belief often called “The Sufficiency of Scripture.” God uses his Word to “equip us” or “complete us” for “every good work” (2 Tim. 3:17). At times his Word *comforts* us, at other times it *instructs* us, and often it *rebukes* us and *corrects* us. All of these encounters with God’s Word are good for us. God disciplines those whom he loves in order to make them like Jesus, and his instrument for shaping us is his Word.

Another conviction is referred to as, “The Necessity of Scripture.” This the belief that we need the Word of God for knowledge of the Gospel, for spiritual health and

⁴ Jesus’ “words” refers to his teachings, which taken all-together makes up his “Word.”

⁵ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*. The Pillar Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 517.

certain knowledge of God's will.⁶ While people may know that God exists through conscious and creation *generally*, we need the written Word of God to show us what God requires, and to teach us how to know the Gospel and grow in Christ *specifically*.

We have been given such a gift in the Word of God! Like the people of Israel in the Exodus wonderings, we need to collect manna every morning because we do not live by "bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." (Matt. 4:4; see also Deut. 8:2-3). But if the Bible is indeed the inspired, sufficient, necessary Word of God, then why don't people pursue Scripture with more passion? More personally, why don't you crave God's Word? Why don't I? Let me mention some "pits, thorn hedges and man traps" we must avoid and overcome.

Why Don't People Meditate on God's Word?

First, *pride will keep you from God's Word*. Many arrogantly go through a given day without thought of reading God's Word. They act as though they have no need for the Bible and are sufficient in and of themselves. However, the person for whom God is looking is one with a humble dependency on his Word. Consider Isaiah's words:

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

Isaiah 66:2b

God looks favorably to the one who places himself or herself under God's Word daily. Even the simple act of opening the Bible in the morning, before you leave for your daily labor, is a humble expression that you need God.

⁶ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 116.

Second, *a misguided fear will keep you from God's Word*. I've met some who are *intimidated* by God's Word, thinking only the clergy and professional ministers can get it. Let me encourage you with the doctrine of "The Clarity of Scripture." This is the belief that God gave his Word to be *understood* by all of God's people. Interpretive principles are important. Scholarship has a place. But make no mistake, Scripture claims that it is written for the "simple" everyday Christian (See Ps. 19:7; 119:130). Have you ever considered that Paul wrote a letter like Romans to "laypeople," not seminarians? He expected farmers, blacksmiths, tentmakers, shopkeepers, mothers, and other Christians to understand his letter. God's people can understand God's Word if they approach it with a heart of humility, seeking to obey it. Theologian, Wayne Grudem says, "No believer should think himself or herself too foolish to read Scripture and understand it sufficiently to be made wise by it."⁷

Third, related to the previous issue, *a lack of understanding as to how you should study the Bible will keep you from God's Word*. At the end of this chapter, I want to help resolve this problem, giving you some practical steps in meditating and studying the Scriptures.

Fourth, *a belief that the Bible is boring will keep you from God's Word*. Perhaps you've used this excuse, or heard this excuse. Maybe it has grown out of experiences with boring worship services or boring preachers. But still, the fault is not with the Bible. The reason I had no desire for Scripture prior to conversion was my heart was hardened. The problem was never with the Bible. The problem was with me.

⁷ Ibid.

Sometimes people come up to me and say things like, “you really know how to make the Bible come alive in your teaching?” I know what they mean. They are trying to encourage me, usually. But one day I want to say, “Alive? I didn’t know the Bible was dead! In fact, I didn’t even know it was sick!”⁸ God’s Word *is* living and active (Heb. 4:12).

If you think the Bible is boring, let me encourage you to consider the following: (1) Test yourself to see if you are truly born again (1 Peter 2:1-3). (2) Test your lifestyle to see if you are addicted to entertainment to the point that you can’t slow down enough to read quietly and meditatively. If so, unplug for a season and read. (3) Consider selecting a fresh reading plan and study plan. Ask a pastor or a mature Christian for some good study resources to recommend. (4) Pray hard for the Spirit to illuminate God’s Word so that it burns in your heart (Luke 24:32).

Fifth, *business will keep you from God’s Word*. Of course, this is not a good excuse, but it’s all too common. Part of the exercise of meditating on Scripture is *making time*. One must plan to spend *unhurried* and *unhindered* time with God. No one oozes into Christ-likeness. You don’t accidentally become a student of Scripture. Prioritize sitting at the feet of Jesus like Mary, who chose what was best (Luke 10:38-42).

Whenever someone presents this problem of business to me, or if I feel myself trying to use this excuse, I’m reminded of a particular cartoon. An overweight man is looking at the doctor who is obviously hearing from the patient that “he’s too busy to

⁸ This response is mentioned in R.C. Sproul’s *Knowing Scripture*, 14-15.

exercise.” To which the doctor responds, “What fits your busy schedule, exercising one hour a day or being dead twenty-four hours a day!?” We will prioritize things that matter.

Six, *laziness will keep you from God’s Word*. R.C. Sproul says, “We fail in our duty to study God’s Word not so much because it is difficult to understand, not so much because it is dull and boring, but because it is work. Our problem is not a lack of intelligence or a lack of passion. Our problem is that we are lazy.”⁹ Like the “sluggard” in proverbs who refused to go outside because “there’s a lion in the road” (Prov. 26:3), we often make bogus excuses as a cover for our indolence.

Finally, *unbelief in the value of Scripture will keep you from God’s Word*. Indeed, a fundamental problem is that many don’t value Scripture and believe its own claims about its potency. What would happen if we really believed that the Bible was “more valuable than gold” (Ps. 19:10)? What if someone would give you one hundred dollars for every verse you memorized? Would that motivate you? And yet, the Scripture itself is more valuable than any earthly treasure.

Consider the powerful benefits of Scripture:

- The Psalmist declared that God’s Word brings revival, wisdom, joy, understanding, warning, and reward, cleansing, purity, and guidance (Ps. 19; 119:9-11, Ps. 119:105)
- Jeremiah claimed that God’s Word brings joy and assurance (Jer. 15:16), along with brokenness and humility (Jer. 23:29).
- Jesus explained to the disciples on the Road to Emmaus that God’s Word points to Him and their hearts burned as he taught them (Luke 24:27).
- Jesus prayed that his followers would be sanctified by God’s Word, which is truth (John 17:17).
- Paul affirmed that faith comes by hearing from God’s Word (Rom 10:17).
- Paul told Timothy that the Scriptures were sufficient enough to produce wisdom for salvation; content for instruction and reproof, and the necessary equipment for ministry (2 Tim 3:14-17).

⁹ Ibid., 17.

- The author of Hebrews stated the Scripture searches the soul and examines the heart (Heb 4:12).
- The Apostles declare that the Word creates spiritual life, that is new birth (Jas. 1:21; 1 Pet 1:22-25)
- Peter added that Scripture produces spiritual maturity (1 Pet 2:1-2).

How Should You Meditate on God's Word?

How should you fill your mind with God's Word? What are the ways in which we should "let the Word of Christ dwell in us richly?" If you are going to become a student and lover of God's Word and the God of the Word, then you need to plan to answer some specific questions. What are you going to *read* and *pray* through in the Word? What book or passage are you going to *study* in detail? What biblical sermons or talks will you *listen* to? What do you want to *memorize*? *When* and *where* will you read, study, listen and memorize?

The exercise of meditating on Scripture is like the other disciplines. If you think they will come without any planning and intentionality, you're wrong. If you don't have a plan, chances are, you will meditate on the Scripture sporadically. You will look back on your year and realize you've consumed very little Scripture, as opposed to a lot of other stuff from the culture.

Meditate on the Word by Reading it

Obviously, the first place to start for meditating on the Word is by reading it. Sadly, few Christians actually seek God for daily spiritual bread. A recent survey reported that more people remember the ingredients on America's favorite burger than remember the Ten Commandments. Kelton Research conducted a poll of 1,000 people to determine basic knowledge of the Ten Commandments. Eighty percent of those polled

knew that a Big Mac had two all-beef patties and sixty-two percent knew that it had pickles! But less than fifty percent could remember even seven of the Ten Commandments. Other statistics show depressing reports about how Christians neglect God's Word. But surely these would do better if they were in a Bible-teaching church, right? Not necessarily. One incredible Bible-preacher surveyed his congregation about their daily Bible reading practice and he said it was one of the most discouraging discoveries of his ministry. He wanted to quit.

Meanwhile, there are others that are literally dying for the Bible. When I went to Nigeria for the first time, we gave away reading glasses and Bibles. It was amazing to see these dear people so overjoyed with their own copy of the Bible. Their church services were long and filled with many readings of Scripture. In other parts of the world, the same hunger is happening. A friend of mine was asked to teach a group of pastors in a house church. After going through Nehemiah, they said, "That's great. Can you teach the whole Old Testament?" To which he said, "That will take some time." They said, "Ok." For the next week he proceeded to teach for six hours a day to pastors who walked, rode their bikes significant distances. They were eager to know God's Word. It is a privilege to have a copy of God's Word. Augustine said, "Where Scripture speaks, God speaks." If we believed this, then maybe we wouldn't mind sitting under God's Word for six hours either through hearing or reading.

There are many ways to read through the Bible and I'm not trying to create a legalistic form for you. Many people can't read at all. Fortunately, there are other ways to fill your mind with the Word (and the essential thing is just that, filling your mind with

God's Word). I'm concerned with people meditating on the Word, not with a prescribed method for doing it. But I'll share a few ideas.

I'm currently reading through a chronological Bible reading plan. It consists of two or three chapters per day. I usually begin my morning here. Other plans that I've used include reading five Psalms a day and one Proverb per day. This takes you through the Psalms and Proverbs once per month. You may then consider also reading a portion of the Old and New Testaments with your Psalms and Proverbs reading. Some prefer to pick a book and read it each day for a month. There are a variety of ways to read the Bible, but just make sure you're filling your mind with the Bible. You might consider one of the plans mentioned at <http://www.esv.org/biblereadingplans>. All of God's Word is important. R. Kent Hughes says, "You can never have a Christian mind without reading the Scriptures because *you cannot be profoundly influenced by that which you do not know.*"¹⁰

Meditate on the Word by Praying It

Jesus makes a relationship between abiding in his Word and prayer. He says:

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.
John 15:7

When we read the Word, we hear from the Savior. When we pray, we communicate back to him. Praying back the Word of Christ should be natural.

Why is it good to pray the Scriptures? Praying the Scriptures will help you pray in God's will. As the Word abides in you, then you can ask whatever you wish – and

¹⁰ R. Kent Hughes, *Disciplines of a Godly Man*, rev. ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 77.

whatever you wish should be in close alignment with God's purposes if his Word is truly abiding in you. When you read the Scriptures about particular virtues and values, pray them for your children, family and church. When you read verses about God's global mission, pray for God to use you and your church among the peoples for Christ's namesake.

Praying the Word will also keep your prayer life from being routine. Have you ever heard the guy that prays the exact same way before every single meal or before taking up the offering? Do you ever feel like you are just repeating the same things yourself? Does prayer feel cold and lifeless? I suggest that you take your daily reading plan and pray it. I love praying the Proverbs for my kids. Here, I come across many things that he probably would not have thought to pray otherwise.

Praying the Word will also keep your Bible reading from becoming routine, as well. People sometimes ask, "How do you spend an hour with God?" You would be surprised how quickly an hour goes by when you are reading and praying. Your reading time will be energized as you pray as you read. Pray for God to open your eyes to behold his truth and then pray these truths for yourself and others that God may write them on your heart.

Meditate on the Word by Studying It

There is a distinction between reading and studying. Reading the Bible is generally more casual and prayerful, or as some would say, "devotional." A *reading plan* allows us to get an understanding of the flow of redemptive history and helps us see important verses that apply to our lives. But a *study plan* allows us to dig deeply into

what we are reading. Jerry Bridges says, “Reading gives us breadth, but study gives us depth.”¹¹

Usually, the in-depth study of a passage occurs around a class or a sermon series. Of course, one may choose to study by oneself regarding a specific passage or theme. I passionately want to see Christians, particular my congregation, become “self-feeders,” that is people who respect teachers and learn from them, but know how to teach themselves and can then teach others.

Let me share with you some guiding principles for studying the Scriptures. To begin, *always read the Bible in an attitude of prayer*. Read, read and re-read what you are studying and ask God to open your eyes to behold its wonderful truths (Ps. 119:18).

Next, *always consider the context of the passage that you are studying*. Context rules the interpretation of the passage. *Context* means, “that which goes with the text.” As you are studying a passage ask, “How does a particular verse function within its context?” The reason “every heretic has his verse” is because he or she doesn’t consider the context.

In addition, *remember that “a text can never mean what it never meant.”* Look for the intended meaning of the original author before rushing to application. There is one meaning to the text with many applications. Since the Bible is a historical document, always ask, “What did the original author want the original readers to *understand* and *do* by this statement?” To answer this, again you will need to consider context and perhaps consult some study tools such as commentaries from trusted scholars.

¹¹ Jerry Bridges, *The Practice of Godliness* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1977), 17.

Another important principle is to *always consider the type of literature in which the verse is found*. That includes the following types of literature: (1) Law, (2) OT Narratives, (3) Acts, (4) Prophets, (5) Psalms, (6) Wisdom (7) Gospels, (8) Parables, (9) Revelation. Remember some basic principles when reading various types of literature. I recommend that everyone purchase a book on “hermeneutics” which is the science and art of interpretation (See Appendix A: Resources for Bible Study).

Further, *remember that the whole Bible points to God’s redeeming work in Jesus*. The Old Testament points to Christ, and the New Testament flows from Christ. Therefore, always ask, “What does this passage teach me about the nature of God and greatness of Christ?” (Luke 24:27). Read with in eye for the ongoing flow of redemptive history. I recommend a simple book like *The Drama of Scripture* for understanding the storyline of the Bible.¹² It will help you get the big picture of redemptive history.

Next, remember to *interpret Scripture with Scripture*. Our high view of Scripture leads us to believe that God’s Word is not only coherent, but also consistent. The Scripture will be its best interpreter. Look at other passages when you see an interpretive knot. Interpret difficult passages with more clear passages, knowing that the Scriptures will never contradict themselves, though there may be many mysteries.

Finally, *since the Bible is a unified book, always look for certain themes in the passage*. Ask, “Where did this theme start?” “How is it developed?” “Where is this theme going to end?”

¹² *The Drama of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004). See also Appendix A.

Building on this foundation of understanding the nature of the Bible, consider following the following three-step method for studying the Scriptures. By answering these three questions, you will soon discover the joy and benefits of studying Scripture. I suggest that you begin with a pen and paper or with your computer and begin digging in your particular passage or passages. You should consider consulting other reference material as you work through the questions on your own (see Appendix A).

Step 1: Investigation – What Does the Passage Say? Begin by reading and re-reading your passage(s). Note the obvious observations and big ideas. Before looking for intricate details and probing the mysteries, notice the dominant truths. As you investigate the big ideas ask basic questions: Who? What? Where? When? Why? How? You will be surprised how many things you identify by asking these basic questions. You will identify the background of the passage, the author, the occasion and purpose. Also note the things that are unclear, and this will help you move to step two.

Step 2: Interpretation – What Does the Passage Mean? In this phase, you are going deeper. What seems to be some key words, phrases, or ideas in the passage that needs further exploration? What's the structure of the passage? Are there important linking words, clauses or phrases? What did the author intend to communicate to the original hearers? It's important in this phase, not to rush to personal applications and the implications of the passage. Try to *minimize subjectivity* as much as possible to get to the meaning. If the meaning of a passage is still unclear, then do two things: (1) look at cross-references (let Scripture interpret Scripture), and (2) consult the commentaries. In looking at cross-references, consider the same book first, then the same author and then the whole of Scripture.

Step 3: Implications – How Should I Apply this Passage Personally? Once you've come to understand the point of the passage, you are ready to apply the dominant truths. Remember that you don't want to turn the Bible into a man-centered, self-help book. You are looking for timeless truths to apply and theological truths about God and the Gospel to ponder. The following are a list of questions for you to consider as you apply the text:

- *What does this text teach me about God?* (His attributes and activity)
- *What does this text teach me about Christ?* (Does it speak directly of Christ? Does it show me my need for Christ? Does it predict Christ? Does it show a type of Christ?)
- *What does this text teach me about myself?* (My nature; my identity in Christ; my need for Christ)
- *What does this text teach me about a particular doctrine?*
- *What immediate things should I go do now?*
- *Are there examples to follow in this text?*
- *Are there commands to keep in this text?*
- *Are there errors to avoid in this text?*
- *Are there sins to forsake in this text?*
- *Are there Gospel promises to claim in this text?*
- *Are there new thoughts about God or doctrines to further explore in this text?*
- *Are there convictions to be lived by in this text?*

Remember, when God's Word is interpreted faithfully, then to disobey God's Word is to disobey God himself. We always study for obeying the Word, not simply knowing it (James 1:22).

Meditate on the Word by Hearing it

Hearing God's Word attentively is essential for the Christian (Neh. 8:1-8; Luke 11:28; Rom. 10:17; 1 Thess. 2:13). The primary place for hearing God's Word is in your local church from your pastor. Paul told Timothy:

Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.

1 Timothy 4:13

There is no substitute for biblical preaching and teaching. You need to hear the Word of God in worship (I'll say more about this in the chapter on "Corporate Worship").

You may also hear the Word of God through other audio tools. My personal favorite is the *ipod* (actually the *iphone*). Here I'm able to listen to terrific biblical teachers as I walk, drive or do laundry (okay, I don't do the last one much). I often tell our church that if you listen to talk radio all day, you're killing brain cells rapidly! Fill your mind with the truth of God's Word by hearing it.

Meditate on the Word by Memorizing It

I don't know of a single exercise that is more rewarding and enriching for me than memorizing God's Word. I agree with Dallas Willard:

Bible memorization is absolutely fundamental to spiritual formation. If I had to choose between all the disciplines of the spiritual life, I would choose Bible memorization, because it is a fundamental way of filling our minds with what it needs. This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth. That's where you need it! How does it get in your mouth? Memorization."¹³

Of course, I'm not talking about just knowing a verse or two. Many people can quote parts of the Bible (including Satan) but very few "let the Word of Christ dwell in [them] richly" (Col. 3:16). The place for knowing Scripture is in your *heart*. The Psalmist says, "I have stored up your word in *my heart* that I might not sin against you" (Ps. 119:11, emphasis added). So, what I'm referring to here is memorization that is coupled with meditation; that is, mulling over the verse or passage that you're trying to memorize so that it saturates your heart.

¹³ Dallas Willard, "Spiritual Formation in Christ for the Whole Life and Whole Person" in *Vocatio*, Vol. 12, no. 2, Spring, 2001, 7.

After all, “to meditate,” according to the Psalmist in Psalm 1, (“on his law does he *meditate* day and night”) means to “mutter” or “mumble.” “Meditate” is an onomatopoeic word that imitates the low sound of murmuring or muttering. The same word is used in Psalm 2:1 negatively, where the Psalmist says, “the peoples *plot* in vain.” The word for *plot* is the same root word for “meditate” in Psalm 1:2. Just as conspirators whisper and murmur and plan evil, the blessed person whispers and mumbles God’s Word. A primary way to mumble or whisper God’s Word to yourself day and night is by memorizing it, so that you can carry it with you all day. The Psalmist says:

Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.
Ps. 119:97

Careful, thoughtful, meditative Scripture memory has numerous benefits. First, memorizing Scripture is one of the means of living under the influence of the Holy Spirit. If you compare Colossians 3:16-17 with Ephesians 5:18-21, you will notice that they are very similar. The *results* of “letting the Word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Col. 3:16) and “being filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:18b) are practically the same. In other words, I think there is a connection with letting the Word dwell in you richly and living under the control of the Spirit. And, I would certainly say this is true from experience. When I have wonderful experiences in God’s Word, and I’m constantly thinking on that which I’m memorizing, I am more prone to walk by the Spirit in my daily interactions. God’s Word and Spirit always go together.

A second reason to memorize Scripture is to pursue purity. The Psalmist says:

*How can a young man keep his way pure?
By guarding it according to your word.*
Psalm 119:9

Even though this question was penned over twenty-five hundred years ago, it's still a critical question (which I will address in the chapter on "Purity): "How can a young man keep his way pure?" And after twenty-five hundred years, the answer is still the same: by living according to the Word. By what method did David attempt to fill his mind with God's Word? Verse 11: "I have stored up his word in my heart that I might not sin against you." Scripture memory has an amazing purifying effect. R. Kent Hughes testifies, "I have seen the disciplined memorization of 1 Thessalonians [a passage on sexual purity] change a man's life."¹⁴ Pursue the glory of God and a life of purity by memorizing God's Word.

A related benefit to purity is that serious Scripture memory helps you fight against Satan. Jesus modeled this for us in his wilderness experience. In response to Satan's temptations, Jesus quoted God's Word. Likewise, as Paul is listing the battle gear for spiritual soldiers, he talks about taking up the weapon of "the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God" (Eph. 6:17). How will you go through the battle without a sword in your hand? Luther said:

*And though this world, with devils filled,
should threaten to undo us,
we will not fear, for God hath willed
his truth to triumph through us.
The Prince of Darkness grim,
we tremble not for him;
his rage we can endure, for lo,
his doom is sure;
one little word shall fell him.*

Sadly, Christians often treat the sword of the Spirit like an old sword in a museum. We admire the ancient weapon. We notice its beauty. We see it placed in a place of honor. But we deem it *practically useless* for modern warfare. Don't we need some different

¹⁴ R. Kent Hughes, *Disciplines of a Godly Man*, rev. ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 29.

weapons now in this sophisticated age? No. There is nothing out-of-date about God's Word. You need it to overcome your enemy. Your weapons are prayer in the Spirit and the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17-18).

Further, Scripture memory makes meditation possible when you can't read the Bible. It wasn't until a few years ago that I decided to try to memorize a book of the Bible. I had memorized several verses, but I was challenged to memorize Ephesians. I had a daily commute of about thirty minutes, and it became a rich time for me, as I pulled onto the interstate and said, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has...." I was able to take my copy of the Bible with me. Often in the morning, when I'm getting ready to leave or as I'm looking out the window, or when letting my dog (Titus) outside, I'll quote Psalm 46 or Psalm 103. God is good to us in giving us the capacity to memorize. People memorize all kinds of things, from statistics on baseball cards, to Nintendo passwords to phone numbers.

I once asked our congregation that if they were kidnapped on a mission trip and had their Bibles taken from them, would they be able to teach Ephesians from memory? God told Joshua to not let the book depart from him (Josh. 1:8). How was he to do this? He didn't have a "pocket Bible." Joshua was to carry it in his heart. Take your Bible with you by having it in your heart.

This kind of kind of memorization will help you give council to people, as well. Proverbs speaks a lot about the mouth of the wise and the effective use of timely words. For example, the author says:

A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.
Proverbs 25:11

How can you speak God's Word to people if you don't know it? I have personally been amazed at how often passages that I'm thinking on become a source of encouragement, rebuke, instruction, warning, or comfort to people during the course of the day. The Psalmist says:

*Your testimonies are my delight;
They are my counselors.*
Psalm 119:24

God's Word gives counsel. And God will use you to give counsel from his word if you will store it up in your heart.

Of course, the most important means of counsel to give a person is how to know Jesus Christ and have eternal life (John 17:3). Since, you may not have a Bible with you at all times, it is critically important that you know the Scriptures well enough to share the Gospel with someone. Scripture memory equips you for evangelistic witness.

If I could offer some suggestions for beginning the exercise of Scripture memory, I would begin by saying, you must make time to do it. You aren't too busy for this. I find it interesting that one of the busiest people of his time, William Wilberforce, who helped abolish slavery in England, was able to memorize Psalm 119. He wrote in his diary 1819, "Walked from Hyde park Corner, repeating the Psalm 119 in great comfort." Surely if a guy as busy as Wilberforce, can memorize Scripture, we can as well on our morning walks or commutes.

You should also not listen to the voices out there that will say, "You're the wrong age to memorize Scripture" or "that's for pastors." David Livingstone memorized Psalm 119 at age 9! John Piper tells of an inspirational letter sent to him by a mechanic from Ohio who memorized fifteen books of the New Testament! His letter said:

I have a maintenance business and I found that in the manual labor I perform, [there is] time that my mind is free to meditate on the Word of God. And I have found myself enjoying, as you write, hedonistically, the Glories and beauties of God in the face of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the process I have memorized 15 books of the New Testament, and I have found the scripture to be increasing sweet and real and precious as the Holy Spirit takes them and makes the things of Christ real to me of a story in which a mechanic memorized the entire New Testament!¹⁵

This is not a pastor. He's an "average dude" who sees the importance and satisfaction of memorizing God's Word.

True, not everyone will memorize Psalm 119 or the fifteen books of the New Testament. That's not my point. My point is filling your mind with the Word of Christ. Challenge yourself. If you have a terribly hard time memorizing a verse, then stay with a verse. If you can do a verse, go for a passage. If you can do a passage, go for a chapter or a book. The reward will be worth the effort.

Another key is to practice Scripture memory everyday. You have to review or you will be prone to lose what you memorized. Don't do Scripture memory like college students cram for a test. Do it like a disciplined athlete, who works out everyday. Start with a review of yesterday and add to it every day. If you miss a day, which you'll do, just pick up and keep going. As you review and memorize everyday, consider writing it down, or sitting down and trying to type it on the computer without looking at your Bible. I think you will also increase your ability to memorize large portions of Scripture if you will say it out loud, as well. Above all, never doubt the value of memorizing God's Word.

Chuck Swindoll says:

¹⁵ John Piper, "Barnabas: The Maker of a Great Leader" [sermon on-line]; available from http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/1987/600_Barnabas_The_Maker_of_a_Great_Leader/; Internet; accessed 25 February, 2010.

I know of no other single practice in the Christian life more rewarding, practically speaking, than memorizing Scripture.... No other single exercise pays greater spiritual dividends! Your prayer life will be strengthened. Your witnessing will be sharper and much more effective. Your attitudes and outlook will begin to change. Your mind will become alert and observant. Your confidence and assurance will be enhanced. Your faith will be solidified.¹⁶

Personal Reflection

The power of memorizing the Word is creatively illustrated in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, there's a scene when Christian is in the dungeon of Doubting-Castle.

He realizes he has a *key* to the door and says:

“What a fool I have been, to lie like this in a stinking dungeon, when I could have just as well walked free. In my chest pocket I have a key called Promise that will, I am thoroughly persuaded, open any lock in Doubting-Castle.” “Then,” said Hopeful, “that is good news. My good brother, do immediately take it out of your chest pocket and try it.” Then Christian took the key from his chest and began to try the lock of the dungeon door; and as he turned the key, the bolt unlocked and the door flew open with ease, so that Christian and Hopeful immediately came out.¹⁷

The words of Scripture (“the key called promise”) were in Christian’s “chest pocket” (in his heart) and were available to him. And these words, this key, gave him power to get out of the “stinking dungeon.”

Do you have a key in your chest pocket when you are in the prisons of life? It could make the difference in getting out of your spiritual prison; or helping someone else get out of theirs. Get God’s Word into your heart and soul as you meditatively *read it, study it, hear it, and memorize it.*

¹⁶ Chuck Swindoll, *Growing Strong in the Seasons of Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 61.

¹⁷ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Burlington, Ontario: Barbour, 1985), 134.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. Do you have a reading plan? If not, will you find one and begin reading daily?
2. What steps can you take study in more detail? Are you studying along with your pastor's sermon series? Are you in a Bible study? Do you need some study tools?
3. Are you hearing God's Word regularly? Do you have some faithful teachers to listen to you?
4. What are you memorizing? If nothing, will you select a verse or passage that you really need and begin working on it?