



**Engaging with Scripture
September – November 2017**



Discipleship at 1st Presbyterian Church:

*Being transformed together
into the image of Jesus
for the sake of others.*

Meditation runs counter to our busy culture, where speed reading, first impressions and skimming are as deep as we go. In meditation we gaze at something or someone long and longingly. We seek the treasure and truth of what we see. Just as moving a prism reveals different bands of color, meditation allows God to shine his truth and light into our hearts.

A Process for Meditating on Scripture

Start by reminding yourself that meditation is meant to help you love God with your whole being.

Read the passage that you will meditate on several times. Pay attention to the flow, general ideas, and main point of the text.

Think about the important words in the text. What do they mean in this setting? What mood or tone do you hear from the verses?

Invite the Holy Spirit to come and illuminate (shed light, light up) the Word in your mind and soul. Without the help of God it is impossible for us to understand the deep meaning of Scripture.

In a relaxed manner, examine the passage in your mind. What associations with other passages in the Bible come to mind? What have you heard said about this text before? Do connections come to your mind with events or circumstances in your life, past or present?

Now consider where the passage settles in your soul and emotions. What response is it evoking within you?

Thank God for speaking with you through God's Word. Set it aside for now.

At a later time come back and walk through these steps with this passage again.

Scripture Meditation

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Mt. 22:37). When asked by a lawyer which commandment he thought the greatest, Jesus first responded with this quote from Deuteronomy. These verses in Deuteronomy begin the morning and evening prayers, which Jesus and all practicing Jews prayed, and still do every day.

What might take place in your soul when you know a passage like this through daily, life-long repetition? This process of reciting and talking about a passage in all circumstances is one reflection of the spiritual practice of meditation.

Another word for meditation is rumination. It is a helpful synonym as it relates to a cow chewing its cud. Cows digest their food in stages by chewing, swallowing, regurgitating, and chewing again. This is rumination. In meditation we ruminate on the Word of God, taking it in, working it over, allowing it to settle, then working it over again to get all the nutrition for our souls out of it that we can. Scripture meditation is a sister of Scripture memorization. They tend to travel together in spiritual practices.

Adele Calhoun, in *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, writes this about meditation:

Practices

A maturing disciple is someone who has said “yes” to God’s love in Jesus Christ and has become an apprentice of Jesus. Our apprenticeship is a lifelong journey of transformation to become like Jesus through the Spirit, growing to love the Triune God above all else and loving others and creation as Jesus does.

Discipleship involves the totality of life: all of our choices, attitudes, actions, thoughts, and habits. While discipleship cannot be limited to a program, there are ways that we can order our lives together and individually that will create room for the Holy Spirit to transform us. We are calling these the “building blocks” of discipleship.

One of these building blocks is PRACTICES. Practices can also be called spiritual disciplines or habits. *Practices help us open our lives to the Holy Spirit’s work of transforming us into the image of Jesus.*

A good image to describe practices is a sail boat. A sail boat cannot move on its own. It is the wind that moves a boat. But the sails must be up in order to catch the wind. In the same way, we cannot transform ourselves. The Holy Spirit transforms us. Yet we have a part to play: we hoist our sails. Practices are ways in which we “hoist our sails” and allow room for the Spirit to transform us. What the image of the sail boat does not capture is that as we engage with the Lord, we are not only moved, we are also changed and strengthened. As we hoist our sails through practices and the Spirit moves us, new sails are formed so that we become a strong ship, able by God’s goodness to respond readily to His love and share His love with others.

To be very clear: practices are not ways in which we get God to listen to us, earn God's favor, or in any way try to be in control of our own spiritual growth. Practices are offered to God with no strings attached. We make no demands on God and place no expectations or conditions around the practice. We simply offer the practice to God for God to use. We are not, through the practice, transforming ourselves by our own power. Through the practice we are offering ourselves to God to let God transform us by the Holy Spirit's power. This means, if you don't "feel" anything while you practice that is okay, even normal (especially when it's new!). No matter what we feel, we can trust that God will be the one to do good work in and through us.

A practice-based life can be as simple as setting aside regular time to pray, confess, read Scripture, take care of our bodies, and rest. It can also involve scheduling and nourishing the relationships God has given us. It may involve examining how we view and use our time and resources. Our practices can also change at different seasons in our lives. ***Whatever the practices, it is important that they become habits. As they become habits, it will become our nature to live life in and through Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit.***

As a way to help us engage in practices as individuals and a whole church we will be focusing on one practice for 2-3 months at a time as a church. The first practice is ENGAGING IN SCRIPTURE (September through November, 2017).

Helpful Practices

Start Easy . Take a week to memorize and meditate on Exodus 34:5-8. This will be the first passage we study, not because it talks about Scripture memory and meditation, but because it is one of the most important passages in the Bible. It is also only three verses, so it is a short section with which to begin.

The Buddy System. Get a friend or family member to memorize the same Scriptures you are working on. It is helpful to have someone work on this with you and to "quiz" you on the texts.

Right Before My Eyes. Write the verse(s) down and put them someplace you'll see regularly during your day; for instance your bathroom mirror, the dashboard of your car, on your desk, the back of your hand, wherever. When you see it, stop and spend a few seconds repeating it to yourself.

Written Reinforcement. When you have a spare minute, write the Scripture from memory. Then go back later and look to see if you got it right.

Auditory Reinforcement. Record the Scriptures you are using on your phone and listen to it repeatedly as you go throughout your day.

Take a Break. Before you begin your evening activities, take ten minutes and bring the Scripture to mind. Ask God to open the passage to your understanding and think about how it addresses your life today.

Memorization

I have hidden Your word in my heart that I might not sin against You.
Psalms 119:11

Does the word meditation bring to mind tedious school work that may have felt pointless? You can let those feelings and associations go: memorizing Scripture is a different thing. Holding pieces of the Bible in our minds gives opportunity for the Holy Spirit to work it deep into our soul and for it to shape us more into the image of Jesus.

If you read the Gospels in the New Testament, you'll see that Jesus had a great deal of what we call the Old Testament committed to memory. You see this as he contends with the devil (Mark 4), teaches the crowds and disputes the religious leaders (i.e. Matthew 12).

We believe that in the Bible, God has given us the truth about God, the world, and ourselves. As we memorize Scripture, we are moving the truth from the page into our minds, hearts, and souls. This then allows us to hold on to it and reinforce the right message and override the wrong beliefs we have held and by which we've ordered our lives. It is one more way of getting the right narrative playing in our minds. This, in turn, sets our love on the path to God.

There are two steps to memorization: repetition and reflection. The more times you can read, write, and recite the passage the better you'll hold it in your mind. Try to do one of these at least three times a day. As you repeat the text try to consider it deeply. What is God saying to you through it? To what situations in your life does it relate? Thinking in this way will move it from your brain into your soul.

Engaging with Scripture

We come with unconditional release of the practice to God. We desire our reading of Scripture to be an encounter with the Living Word, a means of God shaping our lives. If this encounter and shaping is to take place, then our reading must be an activity that we offer up to God consistently as a loving discipline, released to God for God's use, on God's terms, in God's time.

Robert Mulholland

When we submit our lives to what we read in Scripture, we find that we are not being led to see God in our stories, but our stories in God's. God is the larger context and plot in which our stories find themselves.

Eugene Peterson

Scripture is God's word to us. It is living and active, a way that God breathes His life and transformation into us. As disciples, we want to be a part of God's Story. This means we need to know and understand God's Story which is recorded in Scripture. As disciples, we want to be like Jesus. This means we need to know Jesus, whose life and love are recorded in Scripture. Scripture is imperative to discipleship. As we come to Scripture though, our goal is not to master it, but to let it master us. As our denomination - ECO (Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians) - puts it: "we are happy to be captive to God's word."

There is a metaphorical treasure chest of ways to engage in Scripture, creating room for God to master us. We've identified five for us to try the next three months. They are described in the following pages, though you may find other ways to do them (see the resources at the book carts and online).

The Imaginative Method

Here are some tips as you start:

- You don't have to try out all five. If one "sticks" or fits well with your stage of life, feel free to stay with that practice.
- If you try out one of the practices, and it is difficult to engage or concentrate, don't give up. Like any new skill, practices may seem awkward at first. That is normal. Please don't let it discourage you.
- If you are in a small group, Sunday school class, or other group, it may be a great way to 1) try out the practices; 2) talk about your experience with the practices

Finally, enjoy! This is God's Word to you!

The imaginative method of engaging in Scripture uses our feeling and sensing functions. It is a particularly helpful way to read the narrative passages of Scripture (like Matthew, which we are reading as a church this year!). We enter the passage as if we are there, experiencing the moment for ourselves. As you read a passage, imagine yourself to be a part of the scene, a participant in the story. Imaging could include:

Letting your imagination loose and using all of your senses: what would you be seeing, hearing, smelling, feeling?

- Consider where or who you would be as the story unfolds. With whom do you identify?
- Consider being in Jesus' presence in this narrative. What do you feel as you watch him? What is the look in his eyes as he turns to you? Does he have something he wants to say to you?

Once you have recreated the scene and placed yourself there, then begin to examine your thoughts and feelings that have arisen.

- Is there something in the story with which you identify?
- Is there something that resonates or that brings you comfort?
- Is there something that creates dissonance or that makes you uncomfortable?

If something sticks out to you during your meditation, share it with God. Sit for a few moments in peace, companionship with God as His word settles in. In the stillness, listen to see if the Lord has something to say to you. Close your time with a prayer of thanksgiving.

Inductive Bible Study

Respond in prayer. Read the Scripture a third time. Now is the moment to enter into a personal conversation with God. There is no right or wrong way to do this. The important thing is to respond truthfully and authentically. We share with God the feelings the text has aroused in us: feelings such as love, joy, sorrow, anger, repentance, desire, need, conviction, or consecration. We pour out our hearts to God in complete openness and honesty, especially as the text has probed aspects of our being and doing in the midst of various issues and relationships.

Contemplate. Rest and wait in the presence of God. Allow some time for the word to sink deeply into your soul. Yield and surrender yourself to God. Before you end your time, ask the Lord for a reminder that can help you dwell on or live out this word through the day.

The purpose of the Spiritual Disciplines is the total transformation of the person. It aims at replacing old destructive habits of thought with new life-giving habits. Nowhere is this purpose more clearly seen than in the discipline of study. The apostle Paul tells us that the way we are transformed is through the renewal of the mind (Rom. 12:2). The mind is renewed by applying it to those things that will transform it.

Richard Foster

Our love for God grows as our understanding of God and God's creation deepens. This is the ultimate purpose of studying the Bible, that we would love God and commune with God more.

One method that helps us engage with the Scriptures is Inductive Bible Study. The inductive method has three steps: Observation, Interpretation, and Application. Using this approach helps us see what the text is really saying, rather than reading and Scripture and focusing on one part of the text and using it to confirm what we want it to say.

Observation: What does the passage say?

God inspired Scripture through human authors. So what and how the authors write is important to our understanding of both the author's and God's intent in presenting us this Word. These are questions that will help you understand the passage:

Content - As you read the passage, pay attention to the who, what, when, and where questions. Look at any descriptions in the text and try to discern what the focus of attention is.

Structure – Are there repetitions of words, phrases, and ideas? Does the author compare or contrast anything? Can you identify cause and effect relationships?

Grammar – Notice the verbs and verb tense (past, present, or future). What are the important conjunctions and pronouns?

Interpretation: What does the passage mean?

During this step, we work to understand the purpose of the text: what it may have meant to the original recipients/hearers and then its meaning for us. Some ways we do this include:

- Defining any terms we don't understand
- Looking for the "why" of the text
- Exploring the culture the letter/book was written in and to
- Is geography important to understanding?
- Connecting analogies

If you have time, a study Bible, Bible handbook, or commentary can be helpful at this point. In particular *How to Read the Bible Book by Book* by Fee and Stuart is great (and available for check-out at the book carts)

After you've done this work take a moment to summarize what you've seen, distill the principles, and determine the main truth(s) that the Holy Spirit wants you to hear.

Application: What does the passage mean to me?

Think through these questions to apply the truths from the passage. Is there a truth about God or about yourself revealed in the passage?

- Is the Holy Spirit using the word to convict you of a sin that you need to confess?
- Does the passage expose an attitude in your heart and mind that needs to change?
- Is God calling you to a new action or direction of obedience?
- God makes promises to the Church in Scripture. Is there one for you to take on for yourself?
- Is there an example for you to follow?

Lectio Divina

I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saint, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Ephesians 3:17-19

Lectio divina means "divine reading." It exists to further companionship with the Lord. It invites us into God's presence to listen for His particular, loving word *to* each of us at this moment in time. It is a way of praying with the heart, allowing the Spirit room to transform us through the Word of God. There are various ways to approach lectio divina. This particular method includes five movements: silence, reading, meditating, praying, and contemplating.

Silence. Silence is preparation for spiritual reading. It's a way to shift from control to receptivity, from information to formation, from observation to obedience. Come into God's presence: slow down, relax, and intentionally release the chaos and noise in your mind to God.

Read. Read a Scripture passage slowly and out loud, lingering over the words so that they resonate in your heart. When a word or phrase catches your attention, stop and attend to what God is saying to you. Be open to the word. Try not to analyze, and instead listen and wait.

Meditate. Read the Scripture a second time out loud. Savor the words. Listen for any invitation that God is extending to you in His word. Reflect on the importance of the words that resonate with you.