

MEET WITH ME: Bible Reading
SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES SERIES - Part 1
Dan Burrell

Good morning Life Fellowship. It is good to see you here today. It is good to have those of you who are joining us on the Internet as well. I know many of you are still locked up because of Covid. I know also we have quite a few folks who are taking advantage of this three day weekend to go look at some of the fall leaves and you are tuning in now to watch us online as you spend some family time together this weekend. So whether you are here or there, we are glad to have you.

Today we begin a new series, a series that I think is going to be a very important one. It is one that we hope is going to be very practical for us. I want you to kind of note that this is for people of all ages whether you have been a believer for a long, long time, whether you are a young person, or whether you are a new believer. I think this series is going to be important because our goal is to reshape the way that we look at something that kind of has an old fashioned name to it, and one that we actually considered whether or not we want to use it at all. But because it is such a commonly used phrase in Christian evangelical circles we want to kind of draw attention to it, and then we want to restructure how you look at spiritual disciplines.

Spiritual disciplines is a list that has in some ways and in some manner been put together by people over the years, people in positions of spiritual leadership, like pastors and seminary professors and so forth. And the list says this is what you need to do to grow spiritually. This is what you need to do to be a good Christian. This is what you need to do to advance spiritually. And there are lists that vary from person to person, but almost always it includes things like prayer, Bible study, reading your Bible, attending church, witnessing, tithing, giving, and serving. If all of these things are into play in your life you will become a mature follower of Christ and you will become someone who will be able to consider yourself a disciple of Christ.

I don't know about you but I like lists. I am just wired that way. I am the kind of guy that I like to make out a 'Things to do' list. I like knowing what I am supposed to be doing and what is expected of me because I like clarity. Now some of you are more free spirited than I am, but because of the way that I am I want to know what is expected, what is going to make me hit my goal. And so I tend to like these lists.

But here is what I have found about spiritual disciplines. No one does them all well, many of us talk about them but don't really do them much, many of us pretend to be far more engaged in our spiritual disciplines than we actually are, and for many of us at the end of the day the list of spiritual disciplines make us feel like a bad Christian, like we are missing the mark, and like we have just failed. And that is why we want to talk about this. We want to talk about this from a practical point of view, from a biblical point of view, and from a reality point of view.

Unfortunately sometimes in Christian culture what we end up doing is we reduce principles, we reduce practices to a point where they become a burden. It becomes heavy, it becomes legalistic and that is not the nature of a real relationship with God. So

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we entitled this series, 'Meet With Me.' We literally have an invitation from God that is as old as Scripture that says, *'You know, I want to hang out with you. I want to be with you. I want to fellowship with you. I want to talk with you. I want to commune with you. But basically I want to be there where you are and I want you to enjoy being in my presence.'*

And if we are going to do that there are going to be certain elements that you will find in that meeting, in that relationship. Often I have looked back, and I realize that some of you are much younger than I am, but I will tell you that in my head between my ears I still feel like I am twenty and I am just getting started. And then I remember that I have been married for thirty-seven years and that is a long time. I have a couple of kids that are in their young thirties and I don't know how that happened. And then I look in the mirror and wonder who that old guy is. Time goes by so quickly and that makes me reminisce which is a sign of being old when we start thinking about the 'good old days.'

I will never forget when I first met my wife and times were a bit different then. Getting to meet a girl and to be interested enough to take that path toward a serious relationship that might lead to marriage in those days was just different than it is today. Today you can send someone a text, or you can meet someone through Christian Mingles.com or some such website. But it was a lot more work in the 'olden times.'

I had just graduated from college and moved to Palm Beach County, Florida. I often joke when people ask me if God really moved in my life after graduating from a Christian college and showed me where I was supposed to go. And I will joke and respond that it was a very spiritual reason that caused me to move from Chicago to Palm Beach; my reply was *'it was because of beaches and blondes that I moved there, that God clearly called me in those two areas.'* But soon after that I found out when you move to Florida you never get to go to the beach unless people from up north come down and you take them to the beach.

But I did find my blonde there as she was a teacher two doors down from me in the high school where we were both teaching. And as soon as I saw her there was a definite interest on my part. The first communication I had with her was through a handwritten note, so you talk about 'old school,' it was that way in those days. And I discovered that I could send her a note asking her for advice, because she had been teaching at this school for a couple of years longer than I had, and she would write me a note back. So virtually every class that transitioned from my class I would hand a note to one of my students and say, *'Please take this to Miss Weatherholt down the hall.'*

So the student would deliver the note for me. And then one day I got a note back and where the little dot over the letter 'i' was, there was a heart. (*Laughter.*) It kind of gets you, doesn't it? And I am thinking, *'Yes, that is progress.'* Eventually we made contact in this really archaic way. If you are under twenty five you won't understand this but we used to have this box that would sit in your house and it had a little curly thing on

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it and it also plugged into the wall and it was called a telephone. And my telephone was so old school that it still had the dial on it, where you had to put your finger in and then move it around seven times to make a telephone call, because it only took seven numbers for a local call then. You would hear a dial tone when you picked it up, you would dial in the number, you would hear ringing, and then the other party would pick up their phone.

The first time I called this girl who would later become my wife, even though she didn't know that was my thinking at the time, let me tell you it was exciting and we talked on the phone for about two hours. In those days you didn't just go on about your life because the phone cord was limited in how far you could move away from it and the phone itself was attached to the wall. Now things have certainly progressed since then in how we have communication with others.

After we were married, and we were in our young thirties when I would go to a mission field to teach somewhere like in Albania, there would be no phone service at all there because of Communism. And I would sometimes be gone for up to two weeks and my wife wouldn't know if I had made it there, she wouldn't know whether I was safe, she wouldn't know if I were being held hostage or anything else about me. I was doing helicopter trips into the mountains to teach people in villages there and my wife would not have any idea of anything that was happening to me. One time when I flew out of Albania and got to Rome I learned a hard lesson, because when I picked up the phone in Rome at my hotel to finally talk to my wife, I had an expensive lesson because ten minutes of phone usage cost me one hundred and eighty dollars. And I was only making about two hundred and fifty dollars a week at that time. So those were very different days then.

Finally we got the ability to send emails, and then from email we got text messaging, and then after text messaging we got the ability to even communicate by sending pictures. I send my kids what are called 'gifs' all the time, as well as 'memes' because communication has changed a lot. But fundamentally, whether we are talking about the telegrams that my grandparents used, or we are talking about our cell phones of today, there is a desire in healthy relationships that we stay connected, that we meet with each other, that we communicate and that we hear from each other. Even if it is just for a second, even if it is just a sentence, even if it is the famous one my kids like to send me which is 'k' as in 'Okay,' as in '*I am not going to talk any more than I have to.*' But at least you get that little connection.

You know all of you young people when your parents send you a text it will have like five sentences in it, and then you just give them the 'k' back. But if you don't answer them right away what do they do? They freak out, right? '*Why am I not hearing from you? Mom wants to know if you are okay. Are you alive? I am going to call the hospital next.*' And finally you send back the 'k' to let them know you are okay.

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We have expectations about communication, about staying in touch that are important to us. Above all of those, understand this; God has invited us to be a part of His life. God desires to be part of our lives, and it is through spiritual disciplines that we do that. It is through these exercises that we can connect and journey with Him. And if they feel like a burden, if they feel like a list, if they feel like a millstone about our neck there is something wrong. And my experience from talking to many, many people, particularly young people, this is something that we talk about doing but it is a burden if we do it at all. And that is why I want to talk about this. So I want us to look at some principles of spiritual discipline, and then we are going to read our Scripture and talk about the first one this morning. Here are some principles I want you to take away from the message this morning.

Number one is this – disciplines are not an end but a means to an end. In other words here is what we need to remember. When we read our Bible, when we pray, when we give, when we serve, when we fast, when we mediate, when we do all of these different things that are a part of the list of spiritual disciplines, it is not so that we can say ‘*Got that one. Good Christian, Dan, today. Fulfilled that. Going forward on my discipleship journey.*’ They are not the goal; rather they are a means to the goal. And the goal is to communicate, to meet with, and to be a part of someone’s life.

A healthy marriage has different components to it. After thirty seven years I like to tell people I think my wife and I are going to make it. But there have been times over the years where we had to stop and evaluate and make some changes and shifts. And it is interesting that some of those things are not particularly dramatic, and some of those things have just evolved over time to be a part of how we do our marriage. I know many of you see me as quite the romantic example that you would want to follow, so I am just going to share with you that for instance on Friday nights we have a very special time that is designated for my wife and I. And we almost never miss it. It is our date night.

So sometime between five and six o’clock my wife and I look at each other and say, ‘*It’s time.*’ And we get in the car and we drive to Showmars. (*Laughter.*) Once we arrive at Showmars she gets the chicken salad, and if I am behaving and care about my heart health I will get a piece of grilled chicken. The rest of the time, which is most of the time, I get the shrimp platter, but we get the same thing every single time. I get a diet Coke and she gets a sweet tea. We talk for about an hour then we go through this little ritual and I say, ‘*It’s time for Walmart.*’ (*Laughter.*) So we drive across the street in Denver and we go to the Walmart where we each grab our basket and we get our stuff for the week. That is our ritual.

It is interesting because there is at least one other couple from Life Fellowship that we see every single Friday night at Walmart while we are there. So it is not just me. Maybe you are thinking, ‘*Dan, that just sounds like something my parents would do. That sounds old fashioned.*’ And do you know what I say to that? ‘*You do you. For us this is what we enjoy. It is comfortable like a pair of slippers.*’

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Now I am going to tell you this. We also have some wild and crazy times like the other night we went to Chili's instead of Showmars, so we can live on the edge if we want to. And there are other times when we will get away, we will do different things, and we will have a good time. But in any relationship there becomes a comfort, there becomes a routine, there becomes a normalization of communication that is unique to you that may not be the same for everyone else, and that is okay. I say that to say this; your walk with God, your relationship, your journey with Him is going to be different than mine, and that is not unacceptable. That is okay, that is a part of navigating your journey.

I am an educator by background, you all know that. I am a professor at Liberty University, and I like to study how people learn. It is very interesting to see the cross section of students I get in every single class. I may have a student who will say something like, *'I have a hard time reading. Are these books available in audio?'* I may have another student who will say, *'Man, these books are dynamite, but they are not very deep. Do you have some better reading I can do that will allow me to go deeper?'* And then there are others who say, *'I am going to form a study group with some other students in this class so we can discuss this together.'* And all of those are reflective of a different style of learning. Some like collaborative learning, some like auditory learning, some like visual learning, and some like tactile learning. There are all these different styles and I don't care as long as at the end of the class they pass it, they can apply the information and they know what has been going on.

In our relationship with God we need to understand that God has created us with an amazing amount of diversity. And in that diversity you will approach God, you will hear from God, you will communicate with God in ways that are unique to you. And while there will be some commonality between those, and we are going to address those, make no mistake, your relationship with God ought not make you feel like a failure, but rather your relationship with God ought to get to a point where it feels like a wonderful, delightful relationship with someone you love. And if it doesn't feel like that then something is broken. So don't ignore it; don't just say, *'Oh well, that is just the way it is.'* And in doing so you will find a vibrancy in your walk with God that will be a blessing, it will be a delight, and it will not feel heavy. So disciplines are not an end but a means to an end.

Secondly, disciplines are both personal and collective. Beyond that intimacy that comes with God, you understand you are journeying as part of a group. We are called the 'family of God.' There is this collective portion of our journey that allows us to be able to ebb and flow with others to enjoy these things. And it is a gift from God. From the very beginning God said it was not good for Adam to be alone. God never designed for any of us to walk this journey singularly and in isolation, but rather He wants us to walk with others, to enjoy others, to be moving with others. That is the wonderful thing about families.

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Years ago I bought the biggest dining room table I possibly could, and the reason was I like to have people around the table while we are sharing food. I liked it when my kids brought their friends and I liked it when the grandkids were over. It was loud, it was messy, everybody is talking, but I just enjoy it. And we all have individual relationships, we are close to our family, or to our spouse or whatever, but within the collective it is good as well. And that is a part of our spiritual journey. God called us to be a part of a ‘called out assembly.’ We are an ecclesia; we are a part of this body. And in that we can have both that personal walk with God and that collective walk with God.

So let me say this particularly to those who are watching at home. I hope you will understand that while we understand that these are unique times in which we live, we have the pandemic, and we have the blessing of living at a time in our culture where we can do this electronically that is unique to our little snippet of the expanse of human history; but I want to say that it is not a substitute to sit on your couch, in your pj’s with your laptop for having a vibrant relationship with others. And when you can, when it is safe, let me encourage you to get back and plug in.

I would also say that if you are already back to work, if you are already playing ball, if you are already going to Disney World, you can come back to church. I am not saying that unkindly, I am saying that as your pastor who loves you, and you may just need that little bit of nudge from me. It is not a guilt trip, but it is a call to action if you are vaccinated, if you are healthy, if you do not have a doctor saying not to leave your house, if you are engaged in the rest of the world but you just find it real convenient to roll over and turn on your iPad on Sunday mornings, please move forward. It will be a blessing.

And by the way, not only will it be a blessing for you it will be a blessing to others with whom you engage. It can be a blessing to others. You may connect with someone. This morning I have already met four or five different people that I cannot wait to go have coffee with or meet somewhere to talk with. There are things that are going on that are part of a body that can be a blessing to you, so understand that is part of our disciplining to engage with the Word of God and in knowing God.

The third thing is this – disciplines are about practices not performances. Now for a lot of people, particularly if you are a Type A goal oriented person like I am, then we need to calm down, and we need to chill a little bit. So there are things about performing that I like. I like goals, I like accomplishments, but the bottom line is this, that isn’t how we succeed in relationships. I never go to my wife and say, *‘Look, I didn’t forget your*

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birthday this year, I remembered our anniversary, we took a vacation, and we have date night at Walmart every week. Give me a score. I'm an A this year, right?' No, I don't say that to her. Why? Because that is not how you build a relationship. You don't get a raise for that. You don't get a bonus at the end of the year.

But what you do get is depth. What you do get is a richness. What you do get is something that grows and blooms and produces. And in our walk with God you understand that yes, it is a race because we know what Paul said. We know that there is a prize, we know all of that, but the intimacy that God wants with us is a daily intimacy. It is a relational intimacy. It is an invitation that says, 'Meet With Me.'

Now here is what we do, because it is easy to measure accomplishments, because it is easy to set goals and targets, because it is easy to think: '*I read my Bible through this year. I prayed thirty minutes today. I got up at 6 o'clock and spent time with God. I gave ten percent of my income. I volunteered a lot.*' And because all those things were checked off what we do is we reduce them to nothingness in our lives. We reduce them to nothingness.

This was very true in the Jewish culture. Several years ago when I visited Jerusalem I saw some things that I had heard about and I had read about, but there I saw them up close and personal. Among them were some things that deal with reading your Bible. One of them is called the Mezuzah, and it is something you will find in almost every Jewish home in parts of Jerusalem, particularly in the orthodox section. The Mezuzah is this little cylinder which is on the door post of almost every door in certain sections.

In fact, I saw these on office buildings as well as in hotels. And if you were to open this little Mezuzah cylinder you would find a couple of verses of Scripture from the book of Deuteronomy. They would basically say that they should have the Scripture, the Torah or the Bible on the doorposts of their house, and this was their solution to that. In fact devout orthodox Jews when they walk by them they will kiss their hands and touch the Mezuzah, or they will simply reach out and touch it as they walk by. It is just a little ritual that they do to acknowledge that the Bible is important, or that the Torah is important.

What they can do is they can literally touch it, or even take it out and read it, and then never think about it again. But they have checked off that box. Another thing that I saw multiple times over there was at certain periods of the day there would be a call to prayer. And they had what is called phylacteries, which again is from the book of

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Deuteronomy where it talks about binding Scripture about their necks and writing them upon their forearms. And that is what they did which was not a little task. The phylactery was actually a small box that would be strapped around their heads because one of the verses says to place them between your eyes. And inside the little box would be little verses of Scripture from the Torah. They would also wrap the phylacteries around their upper arms or sometimes they would have them around their wrists. And it was symbolic the number of phylacteries that were wrapped around them and it was very ritualistic.

Now I want you to understand that I am not mocking these phylacteries; I am just explaining that for many people this is a ritual that has lost its meaning and yet provides some recognition that they are devout, recognition that they take their faith seriously, recognition that they are aware that they are people of substance. But the problem with that is that is not intimacy, that is not connection, and that is not genuine communication.

And here is the problem with many Christians today, our relationship with God has been reduced to checking off these lists. *'I went to church. I gave. I sang. I prayed. I read my Bible.'* Check, check, check, check off the boxes, and yet we can still feel empty. We can still wonder why we are doing this. And at some point we are likely to either start pretending and not really doing it, or we are liable to just neglect it all together and think there is no practical value in this for us and we throw in the towel.

In fact there is much research all over the place that says the vast majority of Christians today rarely pray more than over their food, they rarely read their Bibles other than at church, and for the most part typical Christians pretty much have a relationship with God that is similar to those who don't even claim to have a relationship with God. And why is that? It is because we have reduced it to a legalistic ritual. Somewhere between empty traditions and legalistic rituals there are biblical practices. And in rejecting empty traditions and legalistic rituals we may have lost some of the practices that will keep us headed and moving in the right direction.

So that is what I want us to do this morning. Look if you would with me in Psalms Chapter 19 and we are going to read some verses. Now the Psalm that we are reading is right in the beginning of the book of Psalms and a lot of the Psalms were songs, others are poetry as well as music in them. They were read, they were chanted and they were sung. They were written in couplets in many cases, or they are written with a certain meter or tempo. So as we read these verses note that this is a section like a stanza of a hymn. And as we read it I want you to look at the different ways that Scripture is

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referenced here. They are talking about the Word of God. See if you can locate them as I read this aloud beginning in verse 7 of Psalm 19.

“The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.”

So what you have is a verse then you kind of have a summary or refrain at the end of it. But I want you to notice as we went through it the different ways in which the Word of God was referenced. It was *“the law of the Lord, the testimony of the Lord, the precepts of the Lord, the commandment of the Lord, the fear of the Lord, and the rules of the Lord.”* All of these are different ways of saying what God says matters. It is important so pay attention to it.

So that is where we are going to start. We are going to start as we consider spiritual disciplines with ‘What is your relationship with the Word of God?’ What do you do with Scripture? Do you read it? Do you listen to it? Do you think about it? Do you consult it? Does it have any significance in your life? Or is the Bible just an archaic collection of spiritual truths that often don’t seem to apply to you and frequently seem irrelevant to the real life you are living every day?

More and more when I talk about Generation Z, which we call Zoomers, and it is the generation that is coming to maturity in age right now, the more frequently I am reminded that where all previous generations at least revered or referred to Scripture in a special way, many of them now have a disdain for Scripture today because to them it holds no real practical value. They approach the Scripture with the idea of what is in it for me if I can’t understand it, if it is not easy to digest, if it is not something that is applicable to my life right now, then it is irrelevant and why should I bother with it.

And I would say to every person who struggles with the Word of God, it is okay to feel that way, it is okay to ask those questions, but don’t walk away so soon. Don’t walk away until you truly understand this book, until you understand why it is important, why it has endured the way that it has, and how it was put together. There is no way this morning in a thirty minute message that I can give you all those details. So I would simply say to you today that my challenge to you is to begin a journey with the Word of

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God that will allow you to glean from it for the rest of your life. And there is a way to do that and I want to encourage you to do that this morning. And here is what we do; we approach the Word of God completely wrong. We do it in a way that is almost silly. These are things that I have personally experienced, so I came up with this list myself this week. And here is the way I have often approached Scripture.

Number one – I approached it the merit badge way. Remember when you were in scouts or Awana's how you were always trying to earn those little patches for your shirt. What we do is if we complete our reading plan for the year we get a prize. I can brag about it and in some churches they actually will give you a free Bible when you do it. We would start in January at the beginning of the year, and Genesis is a great way to start because Genesis has all kinds of cool stories like the creation, the fall, and Noah. You just get going great guns through January and then Exodus has some good parts too with the plagues and the Ten Commandments. But by the end of January you hit Leviticus and it is mostly rules, and then Numbers is genealogy, and by Deuteronomy you have slipped into a coma. It is just too much.

So you know what you do? You forget it, or you procrastinate, or you just kind of let it go away and think, *'Well, maybe next year.'* That is what we do when we are focused on reading the Bible through this year. But we don't have to read it through in the order that it is in there. If you get the Bible versions app on your phone you can find that there are over one thousand different kinds of Bible reading plans. They have them all mixed up with all different kinds of plans. But often what we do is we start with good intentions and a great goal and then it turns into a job that we often quit. Now please don't misunderstand me, I am not saying you should never read your Bible through; I am simply saying if you are reading your Bible through to earn a merit badge then don't be surprised whenever it gets to a certain point and you give up and think the badge really isn't worth it.

Another thing is the 'Chicken Soup for the Soul' inclination. Do you all remember the Chicken Soup for the Soul collection of books? Grandmas used to keep them on the back of their toilet; do you remember that? They were meant to be read one chapter at a time, and they were always feel good stories. They were actually written by a Mormon originally, but they were definitely feel good stories about mankind like a good bowl of chicken soup is.

I can't tell you how many times when I have asked people why they read their Bibles that they have replied, *'It is because I want to be inspired. I like the stories.'* They are looking for the warm fuzzy's, but life is more than warm fuzzy's and it is more

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than short inspirational stories. And many of us are in pursuit of a deeper knowledge of God and an awareness of why we are here and where we are going that is not going to be able to be contained by a verse that we pull out and say, ‘*Well, God loves me today.*’ Or a verse that says, ‘*I can do all things through Christ Jesus.*’ But rather we are looking for something deeper and at a point in time we quit looking because we don’t find that inspiration anew.

Another is the roulette rule strategy, and this is where you kind of take a gamble. I know you probably don’t do this, but I have seen this done, and if I am going to be completely honest when I was younger I probably did this a few times. You take your Bible and you open it up randomly and then you point at something on one of the pages. ***“By the multitude of your inequities and the unrighteousness of your trade, you have profaned your sanctuaries.”*** Well, I guess that is good enough for today, and we wonder why we walk away from that feeling absolutely empty, and it is because we are playing games with the Word of God.

And then there is the PhD method and some of you may be this. You are very scholarly, you are very intellectual, and praise God for people like that. You feel like if you are going to read your Bible here is what you have to do. You have to get a subscription of Logos and you need all your commentaries out, you need a Lexicon and Unger’s Bible Handbook, all these different things. You are going to be a serious student of the Word. And we turn it into an academic exercise. Can the Word of God be studied? Yes. Should it be studied? Absolutely. But is your approach your walk with God, your intimacy with God in such a way it will eventually be a lack of balance that will lead you away from what God needs when He wants you to just meet with Him, to just be with Him.

You know the fact of the matter is that many marriage experts, many people who are marriage counselors get divorced. And they know a lot about marriage, but they break down in the practical reality of how they live their lives. And there are many people who stray from an intimate relationship with God even though they have intellectual knowledge but they have no heart relationship with Him. And as a result they are left vulnerable.

Then you have the bedtime story book. These are folks who have been told that you need to read your Bible before you go to bed every night and so you get ready for bed and you read your Bible before you drift off to dreamland. And many times what you will do is look for a verse of Scripture that is easy, or a story that is good, or even use a little devotional booklet like, ‘Our Daily Bread,’ which was on the table of all good

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evangelical churches for many years. So you will just read that and that will be your Bible reading for the night.

Then there is the fire insurance motive. *‘If I don’t read my Bible every day God is going to get me. Therefore I have to check this box off because I have a lot of things that I need from God, and if I am not reading my Bible every day they are not going to happen.’* Then there is the escape room tactic, and that is where you are looking for clues. If you have ever been in an escape room you know you have to look for clues in order to get out. So this is looking for clues to get out of the mess you are in. *‘I am in a big mess, my marriage is in crisis, my kids are driving me nuts, I am about to lose my job, and I am going to have to file for bankruptcy. I think I will read the Bible today and see if I can find a solution.’*

Now I am kind of being facetious about this but at the same time I am also dead serious. This is why many people read the Bible. And are we then surprised whenever we abandon it, whenever we get don’t get relief or it doesn’t work fast enough for us. What is going on here? We have no intimacy. We are not meeting with Him. And so let me talk about what that looks like. What does it mean to meet with Him? And again I realize that this isn’t a deep exegetical study of a passage, but sometimes we just need to get real, and to get practical about what God would have us to do.

So when it says, ***“Thy Word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against thee,”*** ***“My Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path,”*** when we talk about the Scripture, what is it that God has in mind for us? Let’s look at a right approach. Number one – learn to approach your time in Scripture holistically, remembering that there is not just one way to have an intimate relationship with God. And that is true of every marriage. I know marriages that when you look at them you would wonder how in the world those two people don’t murder each other. But it works for them because they have developed a relationship. There are others who have gone through tough times, and those tough times have absolutely bonded them together. There are friendships sometimes that last for years and years and you wonder how did that happen. It happens because their relationship is not one dimensional.

I often say if you want to have a spiritual connection with someone you should pray together, cry together, work together and play together. That is why mission trips are so wonderful, because if you go on a mission trip you will do all those things and when you come back you feel so close to those people you don’t want the mission trip to end. You get together and you talk about the mission trip and you plan for another one

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the next year so you can go back and recapture that experience. When our relationships are not one dimensional, when they endure over time, whenever we are crying, other times laughing, other times playing, sometimes we are grieving, sometimes we are celebrating, when all those things are happening that intimacy grows deeper and deeper and deeper. And our holistic approach to Scripture means that we have to hear from God at different times in different ways, in different locations, and in different seasons.

And here are some things that we should consider. Number one is the hearing aspect of it, hearing the Word of God. Do you realize that until the last five hundred years people didn't have a Bible to carry? Stop and think about that. All the Scripture was just hearing the Word of God because no one had a copy of the Word of God. They didn't have printing presses; the few copies they had were reserved at the church, and for the first fifteen hundred years of the church, until the Reformation came about, common people weren't even allowed to read the Scripture let alone have a copy of it. William Tyndale was murdered in October of 1536. He was strangled first and then his body was burned and his ashes were spread for the crime of putting the Bible in the common languages so that people like you and I could actually read it.

So understand that hearing was a very integral part, and that is why Moses would read the Scriptures in front of the people. That is why when they gathered to the church the Rabbi would sit and read to the people. So folks we live in a great day because our phones have the complete copy of every version of the Bible you could ever want. And all we have to do is hit 'play,' stick in our earbuds and we are on. You can listen to it while you are driving, you can listen to it while you are exercising, and you can listen to it while you are walking, while you are getting ready for bed, while getting ready for work and you can put it on your Alexa or your Siri and they will do it for you automatically. Echo will play the verse of the day. It is right there at your fingertips, but many of us don't do it.

Reading is another option so don't neglect the reading because reading exercises a different part of our brain than listening does. And if you can read then exercise that part of your brain. And by the way it doesn't mean it has to become this albatross that hangs about your neck that is a great burden, but rather it can be something that is pleasurable. Maybe it is a chapter, maybe it is a verse, or maybe it is a section. We just read one third of a longer passage this morning and yet if we analyzed that verse by verse during the day we could do it for a whole month and not get to the end of it.

Again, don't turn it into a legalistic burden, but rather let it be a blessing to you. Sometimes I send my wife a text or she will send me one. In fact she sent me one this

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morning that said, *'I know you are getting ready to preach and I want you to know I just prayed for you. Love you.'* And there was a little heart at the end. It was all I needed. I didn't need a three hour lecture, I didn't need anything more than that, and it was her way of connecting to me.

Last week I got an email after the message from a young man who goes to this church and who has been one of my college life group guys, and he just said, *'Hey, I just want to share something with you.'* It was one paragraph in length and I nearly memorized it because it was such a blessing to me to hear about some things that God was doing in his life and my role in that. That one paragraph was just such a tremendous encouragement. It doesn't have to be a three hour conversation; it can be one verse, it can be one chapter. And personal relationships are often built in single sentences and moments of time.

I am not saying don't read the whole Bible. You should read the whole Bible. But you should also read each verse. I am not saying that you shouldn't have a plan of action. Have a plan of action if that works for you. But what I am saying is if you don't have a plan of action it doesn't give you an excuse for saying, *'I'm never going to open the Bible.'* Take one verse, put it on a three by five card and put it on your mirror in the morning. On Amazon you can order these little printed cards with verses on them. These are ways in which God can connect with you through reading.

We can also connect with Him through studying. Learn how to study the Word of God. This is rich, this is important, this is vibrant. The cool thing is that because we live in the age we do I can have a question come to my mind and I can literally say, *'Hey Siri, what does this word mean? What does this verse mean?'* And all of a sudden Siri is talking to me. I can also Google my questions. I have to tell you that in prepping for this message I probably did that twenty times, and I got all kinds of information. It is such a cool time to be alive. We need to plug into it and learn from it. Take your time, rejoice, revel and study. And if you take ten minutes that is great; if you can have an hour that is even better, but just meet with God.

There are times when I call my wife with just a quick question and fifteen minutes later I am still talking. There are other times when I call my wife and I say, *'I don't have any time just wanted to catch up,'* and boom, we're done in fifteen seconds. But the casualness and comfort of our relationship allows us to have that. Some days you are going to have plenty of time, other days you are not, but make it a relationship that doesn't feel like a burden but rather a desire that is born of devotion and not duty.

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Then there is memorizing and this is one I think we really neglect. The principle of hiding the Word in your heart literally is memorization. And memorization is where we take Scripture and we remember it. I grew up in evangelical circles where we memorized Scripture and we got little points in Sunday school, we got badges in Awana's or the Royal Ambassadors. There were several different ways in which memorization was encouraged. And there was always some old grumpy dude in the church that would say something like, '*I don't believe you should bribe kids to learn the Word of God.*' Well I bribed my kids with gummy bears for a lot of things.

When I was growing up I had to learn a lot of Scripture and some of the reasons were not always noble, but the cool thing is I cannot tell you how many times over the years the Holy Spirit has taken a situation I was in and brought a verse of Scripture that I had memorized into my mind. And that is a wonderful work that the Holy Spirit does with the Word of God when it is memorized. If you just memorized one verse a week that would be over fifty verses a year that God will use in your life in incredible ways. Just one verse a week.

And you know how it is, I can hear a raunchy song on the radio and remember the lyrics forever. Have you ever noticed that? Someone tells a dirty joke and you tried not to listen to it but you will probably remember that until the day you die. And you can sit there with a verse of Scripture and try to memorize it and just have a really hard time with it. That is just the nature of our broken, fallenness, but it doesn't mean that we shouldn't try. Maybe you can never remember the references. Okay, the references are not inspired, so chill out, relax because you can always Google it if you need to find the reference, but memorize the Scripture. Listen to it; let it fill your heart.

And then the last one is meditating. And meditating is the idea of reflecting on it, going a little deeper. Here is what I want you to know about this; if reading Scripture is exposure to truth then meditating is absorption of truth. Let me say that again. If reading Scripture is exposure to truth then meditating is the absorption of that truth. That is why Scripture says in Psalms Chapter 1: "***In His Word will we meditate day and night.***" The word 'meditate' there is very interesting because it comes from the Hebrew word that is actually 'ruminate.' And the word ruminates is very fascinating because rumination is actually a digestive process.

I grew up on a farm and we had cows. In the morning when it was cool the cows would go out and eat, eat, eat. But when the heat came up they would go a big drink of water from the pond and then they would sit underneath a big tree. The whole herd would just be lying down and if you walked up to them they would be ruminating. Have

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you heard the expression, '*chewing the cud?*' The cud is that ball of grass that the cows would belch back up and they would chew on it. Now that sounds disgusting, and having seen it up close and personal it is disgusting. But it is what is required for them to get the nutrients from that grass they had eaten earlier in the day, because a cow has one stomach with four compartments so it is a four step process for them. They will keep belching that grass back up to chew it some more for digestion until all the nutrients are absorbed from it. If you have questions about the next part of the food process you can ask Steve Robertson who lives on a farm and who shovels some of it all the time.

So rumination is where that absorption takes place. It is when we think about it, we apply it, find out what God is saying to us that is personal to us from it. And that meditation is sweet. Maybe it will just be a phrase, it could just be on one of the names of God we just studied, it could be on a characteristic, but as we think about that it enriches us and it deepens us.

Number two – look for Jesus in the gospel every time you approach Scripture. We sang about it right before I came up to preach and that is that simple gospel. Remember the Bible has good advice, the Bible has counsel, the Bible has wisdom, the Bible has instruction, the Bible has warnings, but most of all the Bible has the gospel. The Bible is the story of our brokenness and God's healing. The Bible has the story of God's completed plan for our salvation and you can find it in Genesis and you can find it in Revelations. You can find it in the gospels and you can find it in the Psalms. You can find it in the Major Prophets and in the Minor Prophets. Every time you open the Bible remember this – God is telling you about Himself, His love for you, your need for repentance and for reconciliation with Him, and you can find it time after time. Can we find financial advice? Yes. Can we find parenting advice? Yes. Can we find information that is helpful? Absolutely. But it isn't a self-help book, it isn't a history book, it isn't a math textbook and it isn't a book of philosophy. It is a book of God's plan for our salvation in which He reveals Himself and instructs us on how we can have a meeting with Him. That is His desire and when we approach it that way it will change how we look at it.

Next, don't emphasize an experience but savor the atmosphere. Don't emphasize having an experience every time you open the Bible, but rather savor the atmosphere. Savor the comfort. Do you know why I like going to Showmars with my wife? It is because it is predictable. I know when I go to Showmars I am not going to get a five star meal. I know that so I don't expect it. I am going to get comfort food. I know what price I am going to pay for it and I know I get free refills of the drink. I know what I am going to order, I know what booth I want to sit in and there is something comforting in

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that. I don't believe my life should be spent in pursuit of comfort, but you know comfort is a good thing. It allows you to rest. There is something comfortable about having that time of day that you set aside for your quiet time with God. Whether it is first thing in the morning or the last thing at night, whether it is as you are exercising, or whether it is while you are taking a bubble bath, whatever that time is that allows you that moment with God it is a good thing.

Understand the atmosphere. It doesn't have to be razzmatazz every time. It doesn't have to be some great spiritual breakthrough. It doesn't have to be *'Well, I learned this today.'* Sometimes it is just that quiet re-connection with someone you love that makes the time you spend valuable. And sometimes you do have a breakthrough moment, sometimes you have a conversation with God that is earthshaking, that is revolutionizing, when a truth all of a sudden happens. But it doesn't have to happen every time in order for the experience to be meaningful. So enjoy that passage.

Number four – appreciate variety in your time with the Word. Appreciate the fact that sometimes you are going to be broken when you talk to Him and other times you are going to be encouraged and you are going to want to celebrate with Him. Realize that sometimes you are not going to feel like reading, but you will listen. And there are other times when you are going to feel like you need to read and that it is going to make an impact. So appreciate the fact that it doesn't have to be the same way every single time you open the Bible. The important thing is that you are meeting with Him.

Number five – maintain the discipline without making it legalistic. And want this balance between the discipline aspect and an attitude that says you can take it or leave it. You know there is always danger at the extreme and we always need to be aware of that. So if you are legalistic you may think, *'Well, if I don't read this God is going to make my car engine blow up. If I don't do this my kids are going to hate Jesus and love the devil.'* So we can have a real legalistic attitude. And other times we reject that and think about God being a God of grace, God is a God of patience, and God is a God of mercy, so we go to this other extreme and it is like, *'I don't really need to read the Bible because I am on my way to heaven. I'm good with God. I prayed the magic prayer and got baptized so I am good.'* And we take that other extreme.

Let's stop and think about this, you don't enter into a marriage with the idea of, *'Oh my goodness, if I don't do this I am going to get divorced. If I don't do this he is going to be unhappy. If I don't do this she won't do this for me.'* If you live that way, if you have a contract that says, *'Thou shalt send flowers every Thursday. Thou shalt go to Walmart every Friday and thou shalt have Snicker bars in the refrigerator on every Saturday.'* If

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you had a list like that, it would not be a cool marriage, would it? That would be tough. At the same time if it is like, *'Hey you know what, you married me so this is who I am. You can't divorce me.'* And you have that kind of attitude of doing whatever you want, that won't solve the problem either.

But what we have in the middle is this liberty to do what we should, not what we could, not what we must, but what we should. And in liberty we do the right things for the right reasons. And God wants to meet with us and we ought to want to meet with Him. No one ought to have to force you to do right by your spouse, by your parents, by your children, or by your friendships. And the same ought to be true of our heart with God. And if that is broken then we need to step back and ask ourselves why we do not want to spend time with God. Why do we not want to give? Why do we not want to ask what is broken and to solve that so we can see the beauty come back to the relationship?

The last thing is this – remember that good conversation involves others as well. Good conversation can involve others as well. Yes, I like the times whenever it is just me and my wife. I like the times when it is just me and the Lord. But I also like it when someone else says, *'You know this is what God has been doing in my life.'* I like it whenever someone else says, *'Hey, I am really struggling in this area. Do you struggle too?'* And I can say, *'Yes I do, I thought it was just me.'* I like those conversations. I like to sit and listen to a sermon and every once in a while it is like, *'Man, someone has been talking to him about me.'* And that is the Holy Spirit that does that. And there are times when I need to hear that, and that is why we need to be part of the body of Christ.

Listen, if you are not part of a small group this church will never feel like a family to you. Families are made up of these small intimate relationships that form the greater collective. And what you and I need to do is connect to a small group. I often say this when we do our membership class, the chances of you being in our church in a year are directly in proportion with the chances of you being in a small group right away. Maybe you don't know how to get in a small group. Or maybe you haven't found one that fits. That is not a problem because we will work with you. Just see Brad Milks or one of the pastors and we will be glad to give you some opportunities to connect. Maybe you want one with older people. Great, we have them. Maybe you want one with people who aren't all married. Fine, we have them. Maybe you want them with younger people that are about your own age. We have those too. We can find a group because we have scores of groups that you can get involved in.

Number two – share with a friend. Have that walk, that relationship with someone else that you can spend time with that knows you enough to be willing to ask you the

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tough questions. Someone who will look you in the eye and ask you how your walk with God is right now. And it may make you feel uncomfortable, but it is okay because you know that they love you and you love them and this is an important conversation for you to have.

Number three – don't forget the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit wants to get involved in your relationship with the Father, and He will teach you the Word, He will convict you, He will remind you, and He will apply things to you. That is one of the reasons why we put this on the wall: *'God we want to hear from you today through your Word and also through your Spirit.'* And that is because it is the Spirit of God that makes application of the Word of God into our hearts.

The last thing is we need to be part of the larger body. Be part of the larger body. I am not trying to scold, that is not my responsibility to be the Holy Spirit in your life. If you know God you have the Holy Spirit living in your heart. But I am a spokesman for truth which is the calling that I have. And I will say this clearly and not meaning to be unkind, but many people who call themselves Christians have an attitude that says, *'If there is nothing else going on then I will make church a priority. If there is nothing else that will present the opportunity for me to do something else, then I will make it to church.'* You can accuse me of being self-serving if you want but it is not because I believe this and I have practiced it my entire life.

By the way there are days that I don't want to go to church. *'But you have to go to church, you are the pastor.'* I know that, but I still may not want to go. And sometimes my heart may be cold, and sometimes it is because I am broken and hurting, I don't want to have to deal with questions, but I also know that when I go and I am honest and transparent that God has something to say to me that I needed to hear. And if He doesn't say it to me directly other times someone else will say it to me. And then there are also those times whenever God puts something in my heart that I can share with someone else that makes a difference to them. Sometimes it is not about me at all, but it is about someone else. That is being a part of a family and that is why we need to be together. I hope you will make it a priority.

If you are watching online again I am not trying to scold you but I simply want to challenge you to think about your relationship with church attendance. That doesn't mean that if you go on vacation, it doesn't mean if you are sick, or immune compromised during this pandemic that you should throw caution to the wind, but what it does mean is, looking at the trajectory of your journey, is being connected to the body of Christ

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personally, face to face, relationally a priority. And if not, ask yourself the question of why not.

God has issued an invitation to us and it is simple – meet with me. To Adam and Eve He said – meet with me in the Garden. To you and I He says meet with Him through His Word, and through His Holy Spirit. As we begin going through this journey that we have laid the groundwork on today, I would challenge each of us to ask what we can do to move our relationship with God to one that is life affirming, enjoyable, intimate and personal.

And if you do not feel that way right now that is okay, that is step one to admit that it isn't what it could be or should be. It doesn't mean you walk away from it; it means you re-approach it with a different frame of mind in a different direction and then watch what God does with you. We are going to go through these week by week and this was week one. And I think if we will listen to what the Holy Spirit says, follow what the Word of God calls us to do, we will be meeting with Him on a level like we have never met with Him before.

The preceding transcript was completed using raw audio recordings. As much as possible, it includes the actual words of the message with minor grammatical changes and editorial clarifications to provide context. Hebrew and Greek words are spelled using Google Translator and the actual spelling may be different in some cases.