

Christian Growth

Week 8: God's Word as a Means of Grace

Introduction

Review some of the general principles concerning the MOG (if needed). [Consider asking how the MOG fit into each aspect of walking in the Spirit] Having begun with community as a MOG, we turn now to God's Word.

Spiritual maturity and God's Word

1 Pet. 2:2* makes the explicit connection between spiritual growth and God's Word. Although this verse does not explicitly mention God's Word, the context (1:23-25) and the parallel passage (Jas. 1:21) make this clear. We will come back to this verse for more help later tonight.

Heb. 5:11-14** also connects God's Word with spiritual maturity—mature Christians are accustomed to and practiced in God's Word. It is also a good summary of what *all* Christians are capable of in our mastery of the Word. (NOT: “This is the bar, and you are a screw-up if you don't reach it!” BUT: “This is the vision of what God says he can bring all of us to—don't miss the opportunity!”)

- We can *all* become accustomed to/familiar with its contents (2 parts) – grasp the Bible's main theme and see how the pieces fit together. When we begin reading the Bible, it is like watching an impressionist artist beginning a painting. We see disconnected dabs of color, but we have no idea of what the artist is creating. But once we grasp his idea, each dab makes the picture clearer. In the same way, once we grasp the main theme of the Bible (Jesus; salvation), the individual books and passages begin to further illuminate this theme.
- We can *all* become able to digest “meat” for ourselves. “Milk” refers to the basic content of the gospel (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:2). “Meat” refers to a growing understanding of how the whole Bible speaks of Jesus (immediate context is about Melchizedek is a prophetic type of Jesus). It also includes an in-depth understanding of the gospel and how it “works” in every major area of our lives – transforming our conduct, motivations, etc. Mature Christians can go to God's Word to strengthen and nourish themselves in God's grace (2 Tim. 2:1; Heb. 13:9).
- We can *all* become “teachers.” This doesn't mean that we should all be able to teach or preach publicly, because this requires spiritual gifting. Rather it means we all should be able to share God's Word with non-Christians and help other Christians understand and apply it to their lives. How wonderful it is to be used by God in witnessing, personal encouragement, counsel, etc.! Using it to help others also deepens our own understanding and helps our retention.
- We can *all* have our senses trained to discern good and evil: able to identify, avoid and refute evil and falsehood in others, our culture, the church, etc. (EX.: Tony not knowing there were “unbelieving churches”). We should develop the habit of testing media messages, religious broadcasts, college lectures, etc. by asking: “How does this square with what the Bible teaches?” As we do this, God trains (*gumnazo*)

us in discernment, so that we even begin to sense evil and falsehood before we can specifically identify them (EXAMPLE).

It doesn't have to take a decade to be able to reach this level of competence. Paul speaks of this same subject to the Corinthians in 1 Cor. 2:13-3:2. He gently rebukes them for not having matured to this level—and they had been converted only 2-4 years previously. But this is only the beginning of Word-maturity. The Word is an inexhaustible source of wonderful and profound life-giving truth. It is “shallow enough for babies to wade in, and deep enough for elephants to drown in.”

God's Word and the Gospel

The whole Bible is God's inspired Word. But Jesus is the Word of God (Jn. 1:1,14), and the main theme of the Bible is Jesus and the gospel—the “Word of Christ” (Col. 3:16), the message of God's grace (Col. 1:5,6; Acts 20:32 – “word of His grace”).¹ This has important implications for how we approach the Word as a MOG:

- We should not merely seek comprehensive Bible knowledge, as good and as important as this is. We should especially seek deepening understanding and appreciation of the message about Jesus and God's grace—which is the uniting theme of the whole Bible (2 Pet. 3:18).

Bible scholars may be spiritually barren, while Christians with a “combat knowledge” of the Word who gratefully love Jesus will be fruitful. Christians who pursue doctrinal “tangents” (EXAMPLES: end-times speculations; fixation on God's sovereignty or on free will; speculation on Messianic fulfillment of obscure Old Testament rituals; etc.) rather than staying focused on the gospel will do great damage to themselves and others (1 Tim. 1:4-6, and many other passages in the Pastoral Epistles).

- We should spend proportionately more time in the New Testament than in the Old Testament, since it explains the gospel in its fullness.

Some Christians say that since the Old Testament is approximately 70% of the Bible, we should preach/study it 70% of the time. But it is probably better to reverse this proportion. It is best to get a good grasp of the New Testament (especially the gospel), and then work your way back into the Old Testament.

- We should not merely develop self-discipline in Bible reading and teaching attendance. We should especially cultivate “craving” and delighting in his kindness through his Word (1 Pet. 2:2*,3).²

¹ “The ‘word of Christ’ is not exactly the Scriptures. It is the Gospel—but the primary access we have to that Gospel is the Scriptures . . . This is what is to dwell in us richly. It is to fill our memories, occupy our horizons, constitute our priorities. We are so to reflect on it, as we turn it over in our minds and learn how it applies in every area of our lives, that, far from occupying a little religious corner of our experience, it will dwell in us richly. This must take place not only in the privacy of personal study and reflection but also in our mutual instruction and admonition. Whatever teaching takes place within the local church, it must be full of the Gospel and its rich, life-transforming implications and applications.” D. A. Carson, *For the Love of God, Vol. 2*, Reading for April 2.

² “What quickens our desire for the life-giving word of God? . . . Those who read the word of God . . . must never forget *why* the word is given and *whom* it reveals. The word shows us that *the Lord is good*; his words are

It is necessary to choose to get into God’s Word even when you don’t feel like it—just like it is necessary to eat even when you’re not hungry. Structures are very helpful for this (e.g., CLASSES; BIBLE READING PLANS). But beware of developing an “auto-pilot” mentality, in which your Bible reading and teaching attendance lose personal connection with God and become mere religious activities to impress people or put God in your debt.

Key practical ways to cultivate craving God’s Word:

- Ask God to create this craving in your heart (Ps. 119:36-37).
- It is important to view the Bible as God’s “love letter” vs. an impersonal rule-book or owner’s manual. This is much easier to do when you realize that grace is the uniting theme of the Bible!
- It is important to pray along the lines of Ps. 119:18 and Eph. 1:17-19 each time before you expose yourself to the Word. Take at least a moment to personally address God, acknowledge your need to be instructed and fed, thank him that he has promised to be your tutor, and ask him to open the eyes of your mind and heart to receive what he wants to say to you.
- It is important to receive lots of Bible teaching by gifted teachers who are deeply in and excited about the gospel (Acts 2:42; live teachings & classes; recorded teachings & classes; books). Such regular exposure not only deepens your understanding of the Word and its application; it also fires your heart with gratitude and enthusiasm.
- It is important to discuss, share, remind, apply, and celebrate what you’re learning about the gospel with Christian friends (Col. 3:16 – “counseling one another”).

“One key to a deep friendship is time spent in long conversations . . . Many people do not seem to have time for long conversations. They have so many things to do! When they have free time, it is spent on entertainment . . . We can’t bear the thought of just sitting and discussing issues . . . (But such discussion) has a richness to it. It satisfies the deep desire in our hearts implanted by a God who is committed to truth. God’s understanding of truth includes more than facts. Christian truth has a qualitative and experiential aspect to it. So truth can be enjoyed only if we are willing to linger with it, to ask what its implications are, to ask how it should influence our thinking and acting . . . Those who set aside time for enriching discussions on issues, on the things of God, will rediscover the joy of truth. They will bring new depth of true personal fulfillment to their lives. We need to bring long chats back into our schedules, allowing significant slots of time for truth-related discussions . . . It is in such times that minds meet, that we experience together the joy of truth which is one of the most precious forms of joy. People who let long conversations eat into their schedules—and that is a sacrifice—will

sweeter than honey to our taste because in them the Lord gives himself to us.” Edmund Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter*, commentary on 2:2,3.

know the joy of minds meeting on a deep level. From such depths true friendships will be forged . . .”³

- **Obey** God’s revelation; **Act** on God’s Word. It is important to obey what God convicts you about through His Word (Jas. 1:21-25; Heb. 3:7,8; Matt. 13:12). God grants deeper spiritual insight to those who are willing to do what he prompts/convicts them to do through his Word. Conversely, unwillingness not only prevents us from gaining more spiritual knowledge—we also forfeit the knowledge we had (“Use it or lose it”). Repentance from a hardened heart may be necessary before God’s Word “comes alive” again.
- It is helpful to build a habit of regular (ideally daily), whole-Bible private reading. This has many benefits. You learn your way around the Bible. It helps you to stay biblically balanced. You find specific passages that become favorites. Sometimes the scheduled passage has providential timing in your life. provides a reading schedule and excellent one-page reflections on one of the chapters.
- It is helpful to practice biblical meditation (Ps. 1:2). This is the practice of reflecting carefully on a smaller passage of scripture and musing on what God is saying personally to you through it. (Practice in class with a small passage like Ps. 131.)

Write out the passage.

What does it say about God/Jesus? What does it say about humanity/you?

What truth is arresting your attention? What would it be like if this truth was explosively alive in your life? Why is God showing you this now?

Consider writing a short prayer pertaining to this arresting truth.

- It is important to memorize biblical passages (Ps. 119:11). This will enable you to do “mobile meditation.” God will recall these passages to help you and to help others. It is more important to memorize what the passage says than where it is (Heb. 2:6; 4:4 - “Somewhere it says”).
- It is helpful to listen/sing scriptural songs that focus on the gospel (Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:18-20). Such both remind and inform the head and stir the heart. They are also easy to memorize for future use, and they “regurgitate” through the day like a bad commercial jingle—only with a good effect!

Keep cultivate this craving! Are you more excited about the Word this year than last year? Do you look forward to teachings, reading, discussions, etc. more this year than last year? What is the direction of your heart and time-allocation in this critical area?

Memory Verses

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³ Ajith Fernando, *Reclaiming Friendship* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1993), pp. 28-35.

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Assignment

Fernando, *The Supremacy of Christ* – “The Joy of Truth”