

The Walk: 2. Study
2 Timothy 3:14-17
October 3, 2021
Pastor Steve Richards

Last week, I told you about my grandson. Today, I'd like to tell you about our dog Winston Churchill. He is a 4-year-old dog that we rescued as a puppy, a mix of several breeds that Amanda says are among the most difficult to train. He loves people and if you come to our house, it will sound like he's ready to attack you, but really he is ready to attack you with love. But because he has been difficult to train, he has never mastered a recall. In other words, if he gets outside without a leash, it's like he's heard the call of the wild and our efforts to call him back have no effect. It's like he's listening to other voices. In our recent move, we purchased a home with a fenced in backyard. At night, before I go to bed, I let him out to do his business. The problem is when it's time to come back inside, he won't listen to me. He sits in the middle of the backyard staring at the hostas along the garage and he waits, and he listens – not for my voice. He ignores my voice. He has this idea that a rabbit lives in the hostas and in the dark he can't see but he can hear. And I wonder if we don't have a similar challenge. There are a lot of things that hold our attention, a lot of voices that call out to us – and the voice of our Master gets lost or doesn't seem as important to us as a lot of other things. Today, I want us to consider how we can hear God's voice as God speaks to us through scripture.

This is the second week in which we are looking at five essential practices that will draw us close to God and deepen our relationship with God. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, established three general rules for those who would be Methodists. The first: Do no harm. The second: do good to all. And the third which I think is the one that make the first two possible for us to follow: Attend to the ordinances of God – ordinances are practices that will keep us in love with God. That's what this series is about. Last week, we looked prayer and worship and I suggested pausing five times each day – first thing when we wake up, before breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and before we go to bed at night – pausing five times each day to say, Thank you God for everything. Today, the second practice is study or the reading scripture. And my hope is that you will be inspired to read at least five verses a day. And if you don't own a Bible, my hope is that today you will be inspired to get one.

This is my first Bible. I've not forgotten that Sunday in September when I was in third grade and Mrs. Gilman, our third grade Sunday School teacher, led our class to the front of the sanctuary where each person in our class was given a Bible. That's the day, I began reading the Bible. I brought it to Sunday School each week. I took with me to college, and I brought to my religion classes. This is the Bible I brought to seminary, and even though I now have many other Bibles that I have collected through the years, I hold onto this one – even when in our recent move, I gave away many of them. I kept this one because it helps me remember how the Bible has shaped my life. When I page through this Bible, I find scripture that I underlined. I no longer remember when I did that, but it must have been because of something that was happening to me at the time – and these verses spoke to me. Today, I read the same verses and they speak to me differently. What I needed when I was eight or eighteen or thirty-eight is not exactly what I need today, but this book, this Bible is able to reach us at every life stage and circumstance.

Maybe you've heard the expression: *You become like the company you keep*. If as Christians we want to become like Christ, it makes sense that we would spend time with Christ and not only spend time but do the things that Christ did in order for us to live into what it means to be a follower of Christ. How did Jesus begin his ministry? After Jesus was baptized by John, he was led into the wilderness. Here's a picture of that wilderness - deserted, dry, without life, and for as

far as the eye can see, nothing but rocks. And it's in this place, that Jesus is tempted. The voice of temptation calls out to him to change the rocks into bread. "Come on, Jesus, you can do it. You're hungry. Turn the stones into bread." But what does Jesus do? His response is to lean into scripture. He repeats the words of Deuteronomy 8: **Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.** Two more times, he hears the voice of temptation calling out to him, and each time, he leans into scripture. When life gets hard, Jesus turns to scripture. Everyone of us will face difficult moments in life. Maybe you are going through one of them right now. When it gets hard or I don't know what's next or I get scared, I turn to scripture and I'm reminded in Psalm 23 that **Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, you are with me.** Even when life gets that hard, fear no evil – why? God is with me. David knew that thousands of years ago when he wrote those words. Jesus knew that as he walked toward certain death on the cross. Today, those same words of scripture still speak to us. No matter what, God will not let go of us.

Psalm 119:97 **I love your Instruction! I think about it constantly.** In Psalm 1 the writer says there will be other voices that pull us in different directions, but if you want happiness **instead of doing those things, love the LORDs Instruction... recite God's Instruction day and night!** There is something that happens to us when we allow the voice of scripture to live within us. But for that to happen, we must keep the scripture in front of us. In 1885, a German psychologist named Hermann Ebbinghaus conducted an experiment in which he asked persons to remember a series of three letter syllables and what he found was on the first day retention was almost 100%, the next day it was 40%, a week later 20% and a year later almost zero. But if they spent time in study and reflection and reviewed the words three times during the week, their retention was 90%. If read something and don't talk about it and don't do anything with what we heard for a week, I remember 20%. But if I think about it, write it down, and return to it or talk with others about it just three times during the week, I retain 90%. The writer of Psalm 1 says, **recite God's Instruction day and night.** It's why we make a GPS available each week – to extend what we hear on Sunday throughout the week. If you open the online bulletin, you'll find a reading for each day or we'll send it to you by email. What I find helpful before I read scripture is to say, "God, what do you want me to hear in this?" And then I listen for one word or one phrase that calls out to me and I try to hang on to that word or phrase throughout the day.

In the scripture that was read for today, the apostle Paul was writing a letter to Timothy, a young man that Paul met early in his missionary journeys. Timothy's mother and grandmother were Jewish followers of Jesus, and they raised Timothy in the faith. Paul became a mentor to Timothy and sent him to churches as Paul's representative. Paul is approaching the end of his life and offers this advice to Timothy. Hold on to the faith that you received from your mother and grandmother **Since childhood you have known the holy scriptures that help you to be wise in a way that leads to salvation through faith that is in Christ Jesus. Every scripture is inspired by God...** The English word is inspired but the Greek word written by Paul is *theopneustos* – a word that scholars think Paul made up because it only appears this one place. It's a combination of two words – "theo" which means God and "pneustos" which means breathed. In other words, "God-breathed". When I read the Bible, I listen for God to speak, I allow the words and message to shape me, and I try to live by it. Is the Bible inspired? Absolutely. Let me give you one example from Isaiah 7:14. **Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.** Isaiah was writing to a people who were losing hope that there is a God. And he wrote that God would give them a sign. Was he referring to the birth of Jesus? Remember this is written 700 years before Jesus. The virgin referred to is probably the woman engaged to Isaiah and when she conceives and gives birth to a son, they will name their son, Immanuel – a Hebrew word that means "God with us." This will be a sign of hope for the people living in the

time of Isaiah. But this same verse appears in the first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew quotes Isaiah: **“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”** The virgin is Mary and the child is Jesus. Matthew had no doubt about that. Isaiah was writing a message that would give hope to the Jews of the 7th century BC and a message that would be fulfilled in the birth of Jesus 700 years later – and Isaiah did not even know that. His words were inspired in a way beyond his ability to imagine.

Somehow God speaks through these words, breathes through them. It’s why I read the Bible every morning and why I have devoted my life to reading, understanding, listening and passing along what I have experienced. Let me offer one more example of inspiration.

When I was in the 7th and 8th grades, we were released from school for one hour every Wednesday morning to walk to church for confirmation. They were called Release Time Classes. Honestly, I don’t remember much of what was taught, but I remember that we memorized about twenty passages of scripture – some as short as one verse, like “Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Others were longer, like Psalm 23 and the entire 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians. And I’ve never forgotten these verses. There have been moments in life when I didn’t realize I had them memorized until in a moment of need that passage of scripture suddenly came to mind.

I remember one morning, I opened my Bible and read the GPS reading for that day from Philippians 4:4-7. That was one of the passages from my confirmation memorization. **“Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say rejoice. Let all people know your gentleness. The Lord is at hand.”** We used a different translation in my confirmation class with the word “forbearance” instead of “gentleness”. I wondered which word is closer to the Greek word that Paul used. So I went to my Greek Bible and found the word (*epiekas*), and I looked it up in my Greek dictionary and it said “forbearing spirit”. Let all people know your “forbearing spirit”. Forbearance is more than gentleness. It’s a generosity of spirit. So all day I carried that verse with me: Let all people know your forbearance.

I think some people should not be permitted to have a horn on their car. I was in the drive-through lane, waiting for my order to be filled when the driver in the car behind me started honking his horn. I think he was tired of waiting in a line that wasn’t moving. It’s the drive-thru. It’s supposed to be faster. But I couldn’t move because the car in front of me wasn’t moving and the car in front of that one wasn’t moving. And there was some delay with the order for the driver at the front of the line. But the guy behind me was honking at me and it wasn’t making me feel particularly charitable. My first thought was – I’m a big guy, I’ll walk back there and ask him to be a little more patient – but I was afraid that wouldn’t go well. Who knows, it might even lead to one of those stories that makes the news every once in a while. (*Pastor gets arrested for starting a fight in the drive-thru lane*). So I just sat there, and felt irritated when suddenly the verse came to mind – “Let all people know your forbearance.” So when I got to the window where I was supposed to pay, I told the woman, “I’m paying for the guy behind me and if there’s any change, give it to him.” And I gave her a \$20 bill and drove off. Did the guy behind learn anything? I don’t know. Chances are he learned that if you intimidate the driver in front of you, he’ll buy you lunch. But I learned something – if I will open the Bible and hang on to what I’m reading, it can shape my life – and maybe, just maybe somebody will see “the Lord is at hand”.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of October 3, 2021

Weekly Prayer: Lord, speak to me. I am here to listen. Help me to see beyond the printed words and to see you, my Creator, Lord and Savior. Help me to sense your presence as you

inspire and guide me. Let your holy word mold me in your image, making me the servant you would have me become. In your holy name, Amen.

Monday, October 4

Scripture: Luke 10:38-42

While Jesus and his disciples were traveling, Jesus entered a village where a woman named Martha welcomed him as a guest. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his message. By contrast, Martha was preoccupied with getting everything ready for their meal. So Martha came to him and said, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to prepare the table all by myself? Tell her to help me." The Lord answered, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. One thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the better part. It won't be taken away from her."

Observation: In the New Testament, to "sit at someone's feet" meant becoming that person's disciple. In this story, Martha did what the culture valued in women: cleaned the house and cooked the food. Mary did what the culture valued in men: became a disciple. Jesus put no gender or other limits on whom he wished to teach. He wanted all his followers to grow spiritually.

Application: The contrast challenged stereotypes about gender roles: one sister was preoccupied with getting everything ready for their meal, the other one sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his message. Which one sounds more like the way you live your life? Jesus said, "Mary has chosen the better part." Are there ways in which you are choosing, day by day, to sit at the Lord's feet and listen to his message?

Prayer: O Lord, I have a lot to do. It's hard to stop all my doing to listen to you. Help me recognize how important that is to my growth as your follower. Amen.

Tuesday, October 5

Scripture: James 1:2-5

My brothers and sisters, think of the various tests you encounter as occasions for joy. After all, you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. Let this endurance complete its work so that you may be fully mature, complete, and lacking in nothing. But anyone who needs wisdom should ask God, whose very nature is to give to everyone without a second thought, without keeping score. Wisdom will certainly be given to those who ask.

Observation: Every life has challenges; sometimes minor, other times trials that test the very fiber of our being. James urged Christians to meet life's tests as occasions for joy. He didn't mean the tests were pleasant, but rather that times that test us, in small or large ways, are chances to grow endurance. God will use that endurance, James went on, to "complete its work so that you may be fully mature, complete, and lacking in nothing."

Application: James offered a realistic view of life: there will be hard times. How can our faith shape the way we view these trials? James urged his readers to see the tests as "occasions for joy." He was not naïve. He knew human nature is not at all inclined to view tests as "occasions for joy." That's why in verse 5 he wrote that God will freely give wisdom to anyone who asks. When has God given you wisdom to face a tough challenge?

Prayer: Lord God, I find it hard to see even a gray and rainy day or a jam-packed parking lot as an occasion for joy. Keep teaching me to view life your way, to value the endurance and trust you can grow in me in tough times. Amen.

Wednesday, October 6

Scripture: 2 Timothy 2:14-15, 23-25

Remind them of these things and warn them in the sight of God not to engage in battles over words that aren't helpful and only destroy those who hear them. Make an effort to present yourself to God as a tried-and-true worker, who doesn't need to be ashamed but is one who interprets the message of truth correctly.

Avoid foolish and thoughtless discussions, since you know that they produce conflicts. God's slave shouldn't be argumentative but should be kind toward all people, able to teach, patient, and should correct opponents with gentleness. Perhaps God will change their mind and give them a knowledge of the truth.

Observation: Paul urged Timothy to value reading and applying the principles of the Bible accurately. As Timothy's spiritual mentor, Paul urged him to "Present yourself to God as...a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth." Doing that correctly also involved embodying its principles in the way he taught and shared. "Be kind toward all people" was an important part of teaching effectively.

Application: You may have heard the saying that "if you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything." In what ways are you learning and understanding more of the Bible's overarching message, and not just snippets here and there? How can an informed, Christ-centered study of the Bible help you discern truth from falsehood among the many religious ideas that clamor for your attention?

Prayer: Lord of my life, help me to keep growing into a "tried and true worker" for your kingdom. Make me accurate, kind and gentle in sharing what I learn from you. Amen.

Thursday, October 7

Scripture: Psalm 119:11-12, 103-105

I keep your word close, in my heart,
so that I won't sin against you.
You, LORD, are to be blessed!
Teach me your statutes.

Your word is so pleasing to my taste buds—
it's sweeter than honey in my mouth!
I'm studying your precepts—
that's why I hate every false path.
Your word is a lamp before my feet
and a light for my journey.

Observation: To grow spiritually from Bible reading calls for us to open our hearts as well as our minds to what God wants to say to us through the Bible. Sometimes all we know of Psalm 119 is that it is the longest chapter in the Bible. But it is so much more than that. Today's

passage offers a lovely prayer model that can prepare us to hear and value God's word on the pages of Scripture.

Application: "I have hidden your word in my heart," the psalmist wrote. What does it take to move the word from the printed page (or the screen) into your heart? One effective way to start is to choose a short Bible passage (John 3:16-17, Psalm 23, or even if you want to start with a really short passage Psalm 119:11 from today's reading) and commit it to memory this week.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, in the Bible I find the centuries-old story of how you've dealt with all kinds of people who loved and followed you. Help me learn more about how my walk with you is woven into that same story. Amen.

Friday, October 8

Scripture: James 1:22-25

You must be doers of the word and not only hearers who mislead themselves. Those who hear but don't do the word are like those who look at their faces in a mirror. They look at themselves, walk away, and immediately forget what they were like. But there are those who study the perfect law, the law of freedom, and continue to do it. They don't listen and then forget, but they put it into practice in their lives. They will be blessed in whatever they do.

Observation: Growing in faith involves study, but it is not simply an intellectual exercise. James the apostle said God seeks "doers of the word," not just "hearers." That idea shaped the life of John Wesley, Methodism's founder. Based on what they studied in Scripture, he and his friends got actively involved in helping prisoners and widows in Oxford. Holding together personal and social holiness has remained important to Wesley's spiritual descendants ever since.

Application: James used a phrase that may startle us at first, writing of "the perfect law, the law of freedom." When have you found in your own life that ignoring God's principles to do whatever you feel like produces, not freedom, but a hurtful kind of slavery? In what ways have you found that living out God's calling increases your freedom rather than limiting or frustrating it?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I want the true freedom you offer me. Help me use my freedom to serve and bless others, as you did. Amen.

Saturday, October 9

Scripture: Ephesians 4:11-16

He gave some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers. His purpose was to equip God's people for the work of serving and building up the body of Christ until we all reach the unity of faith and knowledge of God's Son. God's goal is for us to become mature adults—to be fully grown, measured by the standard of the fullness of Christ. As a result, we aren't supposed to be infants any longer who can be tossed and blown around by every wind that comes from teaching with deceitful scheming and the tricks people play to deliberately mislead others. Instead, by speaking the truth with love, let's grow in every way into Christ, who is the head. The whole body grows from him, as it is joined and held together by all the supporting ligaments. The body makes itself grow in that it builds itself up with love as each one does its part.

Observation: "God's goal," Ephesians said, "is for us to become mature adults...fully grown, measured by the standard of the fullness of Christ." At times we find that unity with Christ and

one another is still hard. But God calls us to become spiritually mature so that nothing can knock us off course. Building this kind of community requires us to speak the truth in love, with our understanding of truth grounded in thoughtful Bible study guided by the Holy Spirit so that we become more like our Savior Jesus Christ. All our different gifts need to work together so that we can strengthen and equip one another.

Application: Changing the world and building God's kingdom calls us to take our faith beyond our weekly worship service. What are some of the steps you recall that moved you beyond being a beginner in your faith, and helped you grow toward greater maturity? What are you doing in your day-to-day life that nurtures spiritual maturity in you and others, building up the body of believers in love? What one or two items are most clearly on your growth horizon right now?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you are building me and you are building us into a community of spiritually mature people, growing in every way into your life of love. Help me to do my part as a faithful follower growing more and more into your image. Amen.