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**Core Seminar**

**Meeting with God**

**Class 2: Meeting with God in His Word**

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**Introduction (prayer)**

Last week we began by looking at two assumptions we bring into this class: 1) That it is actually *possible* both to know and to meet with God; and 2) That we *should* meet with God on a consistent, even daily basis. As you’ll see on your handout, we said that a quiet time is “part of the day that we set aside for the worship of God, for the reading of the Word of God and for fellowship with God so that we would know Him more, know ourselves in light of Him, and know the world according to His perspective.” In other words, the quiet time recalibrates our perspective on the world according to God’s perspective on the world, and a key aspect of this recalibration is meeting with God by reading His Word.

And we know that we *can* meet with God and get close to Him and know Him more because we have a great high priest who serves as our mediator. We are sinful people. In our desires and decisions to trust ourselves over and above God on a daily basis, we have committed treason. We have sinned against the holy, infinite God and we have no right to come into his presence. He has banished us and thus, we need a mediator to gain access to Him. Jesus Christ is that mediator for us, through His blood shed on the cross. He is the perfect sacrifice, paid *once* for *all time*. And so ***Hebrews 4:16*** says “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” That’s the key verse for this course. Today we’re going to talk specifically about two ways to meet with God in His Word. These are two ways of what Don Whitney calls, “Bible intake.”

We know that we need to be in God’s Word because scripture speaks to that explicitly. Let’s look at two passages that clearly speak to this point. The first is ***John 17:17***, when Jesus is praying to His Father.

“Sanctify them in the truth,” he prays. “Your word is truth.” So, Jesus prays for our sanctification, the daily process of our being made righteous and being conformed to the image of Christ. Jesus wants us to be like Him. The means by which He asks God to do this is by the truth. He could have left it alone there. He could have stopped and ended the prayer here. But He didn’t. He got more specific. There is no question about what truth Jesus is talking about. “Your word is truth.” What is truth? God’s word. How are we sanctified? By truth. Through truth we are sanctified. God’s word is truth, so we are sanctified by the word of God. The entire Bible is composed of this sanctifying truth.

Second, let’s look at a few parts of ***Psalm 119*** (turn there). This is a psalm of praise and prayer to God from a man who has a high esteem for God’s Word. The Word of God, his precepts, his testimonies spring up from David in praise to God. From Psalm 119 we see that God’s word *saves* and God’s word *sustains*.

**Psalm 119:57-64**

“The Lord is my portion; I promise to keep your words. I entreat your favor with all my heart; be gracious to me according to your promise. When I think on my ways, I turn my feet to your testimonies; I hasten and do not delay to keep your commandments. Though the cords of the wicked ensnare me, I do not forget your law. At midnight I rise to praise you, because of your righteous rules. I am a companion of all who fear you, of those who keep your precepts. The earth, O Lord, is full of your steadfast love; teach me your statutes!”

Here are five things we learn from just this one section of Psalm 119.

1. God’s word of promise to us is the foundation of our receiving grace from him **(vs. 58 - be gracious to me according to your promise).**
2. God’s word humbles us and causes us to look to him **(vs. 59 - When I think on my ways, I turn my feet to your testimonies).**
3. God’s word is more powerful than anyone who would oppose us **(vs. 61 - though the cords of the wicked ensnare me, I do not forget your law).**
4. God’s word leads us to praise Him **(vs. 62 - …I rise to praise you, because of your righteous rules).** There is something circular going on here. We go to God in His Word because He is worthy. And when we go to His word He sends us back to praise Him. Can you see the circle here? Spending time in God’s Word leads us to praise Him, and praising Him leads us to want to know Him more through His Word.
5. The Word of God leads us into the fellowship of the church **(vs. 63 - I am a companion of all who fear you, of those who keep your precepts).**

So, to summarize, God’s word of promise to us is the foundation for our receiving grace from Him, God’s Word humbles us, His Word is more powerful than any who oppose us, His Word leads us to praise Him, and His Word leads us to the fellowship of the church.

**The Bible**

Let’s talk now a bit more about the Bible itself. The Bible is a book written by God about God. It contains the message of salvation. It will lead us away from sin. It will remind us that we are not made for this world. It will tell us the truth of God. It is a book about God. It is not a book we should read simply to try to make ourselves better people. When we read it, we should ask, “What does this tell me about God?” About his character? About his purposes? As Paul and Silas were preaching in the town of Berea, Luke (the author of Acts), tells us in Acts 17:11 that “these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” Are we like the Bereans? Do we examine the scriptures daily?

The Bereans are a great example for us, but over and above the Bereans, we are called to follow Jesus. Many times in scripture it describes Jesus as going out to a quiet place where he could spend one-on-one time with the Father. Matthew 14:22-23, Mark 1:35 and Luke 5:16 all describe Jesus getting away from the crowds, even away from his disciples, and spending time alone talking to the Father. If *Jesus* needed to spend this time with God, how much more do we need to do it? Follow Jesus in spending time alone with God.

Being busy is often a real hindrance to spending daily time with the Lord. We live in a very busy area, and I’m sure that many of you are incredibly busy. Work, school, family, church, and countless other things vie for our time. Remember the example of Christ, who gave his life to healing and teaching numerous people, yet found time to be by Himself with His Father. People flocked to him and yet, he made time to get away.

Question: what is one hindrance for you that keeps you from spending time with the Lord in His Word?

Don Whitney has laid out five ways that we meet with God through His Word. Five means of “Bible intake,” as he calls it. You’ll see them on your handout at the top of page 2:

1. Hearing
2. Reading
3. Studying
4. Memorizing
5. Meditating

Today we’re going to look at hearing and reading. Next week we’ll look at studying, memorizing and meditating.

**Hearing the Word of God**

There is a scriptural basis for the public hearing of God’s word. Ezra read God’s word publicly to God’s people after they had returned from exile and Nehemiah had led them in rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem. In Nehemiah 8:1-4, the people asked Ezra to read the book of Moses *publicly*. They “told” him. So we see that the people had a *desire* to hear the Word. Second, they were attentive for a long time. Ezra read from “early morning until midday” (you think our sermons are long!) and yet the people were attentive even though it was read for a long time.

Likewise, Paul tells Timothy in **1 Tim 4:13**, “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.”

Don Whitney writes, “We are to discipline ourselves to go and hear God’s word.” He also writes, “Hearing the Word of God is not merely passive listening, it is a discipline to be cultivated (Spiritual Disciplines – Pg. 31).” It is not going to hear an academic lecture, as much as I might like that as an academic. It is going to hear the very Word of God preached. Whitney gives the example of some Korean Christians who used to use his church for a midweek service. He says that they would arrive and always take several moments of bowed silence before entering corporately together into worship. There is a calm reverence in this example that might be helpful for us to consider as we go to meet with God corporately in the midst of busy schedules. We do something similar in our services with the moment of reflection early in the service. I encourage you to take advantage of that time. Don’t use it to get your Bible out, or get a piece of gum, but rather use it to prepare your hearts and minds to hear the words of the living God read and preached.

There are a number of benefits to hearing the Word of God regularly, but I want to highlight one of them particularly for us. A benefit of regularly hearing the Word of God is that it cultivates a hunger for God’s Word. (Psalm 119:103-104). This hunger for hearing the Word regularly will lead to a desire to read the Bible on your own outside of just hearing it Sunday mornings. If you want to study more of the benefits of hearing the Word, I would encourage you to read Thabiti’s book “What is a Healthy Church Member?” which speaks in more detail in Chapter 1 about *hearing* the Word.

The question then becomes: how do I grow in my ability to hear and *listen* to the Word of God? Thabiti also has good advice here. One way is through discussing what you have heard with others. This will help you see what others are getting from hearing the Word. Through the example of others you will be able to grow in your ability to listen to God’s word more faithfully. Second, spend time listening to sermons or an audio Bible outside of Sunday mornings. Many of us in the DC area have a reasonably long commute. Use that time to listen to the Word more regularly and practice becoming a better listener to God’s Word.

Question: How has hearing the Word of God preached helped you meet with God and grow in your relationship with him?

**Reading the Word of God**

*Hearing* God’s Word preached is not what this class is primarily focused on. The “Living as a Church” class is a great one to go to if you have more questions about that, or you can talk to me after class today. The focus of this entire class is on meeting with God personally and on a daily basis. Let’s talk now about *reading* God’s Word.

***The Reformation and Reading***

There was a time when reading God’s Word was essentially impossible for the common person. During the years leading up to the early 16th century, the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England would not allow a Bible to be published or written in the language of the common people. The only way for the people to know the Bible was to hear it preached by the priests and bishops. And then the reformation happened. In 1516, Erasmus had his Greek translation of the Bible printed. One historian described the importance of that event in this way:

This was the first time that the Greek New Testament had been printed. **It is no exaggeration to say that it set fire to Europe.** Luther [1483-1546] translated it into his famous German version of 1522. In a few years there appeared translations from the Greek into most European vernaculars. They were the true basis of the popular reformation.

Luther begins to devote his life to getting the word of God to the common man and William Tyndale gives up his life to translate the scriptures into English.

The same historian talks about the importance of the personal reading of God’s word:

…The energy which affected every human life in northern Europe, however, came from a different place. It was not the result of political imposition. It came from the discovery of the Word of God as originally written . . . in the language of the people. Moreover, it could be read and understood, without censorship by the Church or mediation through the Church. . . . Such reading produced a totally different view of everyday Christianity…

Luther said in the year before he died, “Let the man who would hear God speak, read the Holy Scripture (Piper, quoted from What Luther Says: An Anthology, Vol. 2).”

He wrote in 1533, “For a number of years I have now annually read through the Bible twice. If the Bible were a large, mighty tree and all its words were little branches I have tapped at all the branches, eager to know what was there and what it had to offer (Piper, quoted from What Luther Says: An Anthology, Vol. 2).”

These men (Tyndale and Luther) devoted (and, in Tyndale’s case, lost) their lives that those who came after them, including you and I, could read the scripture for ourselves. Two powerful realities strike me when I think about this:

1. Men actually died so that we could read God’s Word. William Tyndale was burned alive to get God’s Word to us.
2. We have the privilege and gift of holding in our hands and beholding with our eyes the very words of God. These are no mere stories.

If those two thoughts will not drive us into God’s word daily then I do not know what will.

So, there’s our historical, biographical motivation for meeting with God through His Word. Now let’s look at our scriptural motivation.

***Scriptural Basis for Reading***

**Matthew 4:4**, to me, is the key text on taking God’s word in. “It is written, man shall not live on bread alone but on every word that comes out of the mouth of God.” Here’s the parallel. If you don’t eat physical food, you die. Likewise, if you don’t eat spiritual food, you die. Reading God’s word is one of the primary ways that we feast on God.

You say, “Do I really have to read? Can’t I just show up to church and hear the word preached? Can’t I just listen to a sermon on my ipod every day?” Merely *listening* to God’s word and never *reading* it cultivates passivity, which can and often does lead to sin.

There is no substitute for that daily, personal digging into the deep things of God through His word. A life that lacks personal reading, study, meditation and prayer is a life that breeds passivity. Consistent dependence on others for spiritual life and knowledge of God will lead to emptiness and a drying up of our relationship with God. We cannot ultimately rely on others’ knowledge of God to cultivate our own relationship with God any more than I can rely merely on conversations with my wife in order to know my sons. We need to go to God on our own in His Word.

It is interesting that Jesus often asks, “Haven’t you read…? (Matt. 12:3 – Have you not read what David did when he was hungry…?)” And when he is tempted by Satan in the desert he responds, “It is written…” There is an assumption here that reading is taking place.

So, what are some practical things we can think about that would help us be more consistent and profitable in reading God’s Word? Here are three:

1. Find the time

As sinful people, it is our heart and flesh’s first inclination to steer away from God. It is easy to make excuses to not spend daily time with God in His word. “I’m too tired today.” My own pet phrase, “We had a rough night with our kids, so I can’t get up that early.” “I have to be at work early today so I can’t spend time in God’s word.” “I don’t get to hang out with those people that often. God won’t mind if I get some good fellowship time instead of reading the Bible tonight.”

We live in one of the busiest cities in the world, and if you’re like me with a family and young children, you might be even busier. Before I was married or worked full-time, I felt busy, but I also had the time to get into the Word essentially anytime during the day that I wanted, though it was helpful for me to schedule a set time to do it each day. Now that I have both a job and a family, I have to be very intentional to schedule that time out. It’s difficult for me to schedule time in the evenings, so I often use my commute on public transportation for reading and prayer. We need to remember that Jesus had many time demands, and yet he still got away. Oh, may we not draw parallels between reading work-related documents or student papers or journal articles and the living and active Word of God. The Word of God will refresh us if only we’ll go to the stream to take a drink.

***When should I read?***

Well, there is no hard and fast rule to this. Some people are morning people and some are night people. That said, I think that doing your quiet time in the morning is the best time to do it, and I would encourage each of you to start your days off by reading God’s word and praying. It helps you focus your day on the Lord as opposed to your own life. It sets the tone for the rest of your day.

***How much time do I need?***

What is important is not the time you spend reading or praying. What is important is that you meet with God. This could be for 20 minutes. It could be for an hour. It could be more or less. It is better to read a little and understand what you read and have it affect your life than to read a lot and not get anything out of it.

Please don’t hear this as a license to spend 5 minutes a day reading the Bible. Especially if you’ve been a Christian for a long time, if you’re only spending 5 minutes a day alone with God then there is probably something wrong. We should want to go to God’s Word. While time is not the most important thing, it is often the case that the more time you spend with someone, the better you’ll get to know them. The more time you spend with God the more you will know Him as well. In your quiet times, strive to know the Lord.

***What should I read? It is important to…***

1. Make a plan

I typically need to have a plan to get things done. If you sit down with God’s word every day and haven’t thought about what to do once you get there, you’ll probably find yourself just wandering through the text with no consistency and little fruit. It is helpful to think in advance about what you need to read. There is no science to this. This class is not about giving you a formula that will guarantee you to have a good meeting with God. You might need to plan for 30 minutes. You might need to plan for an hour. Maybe less. Maybe more. Once you’re there, what do you read? There are lots of plans to help you read through the Bible in a year. You might want to pick one Old Testament book and one New Testament book to be reading through at the same time. For a long time, I read one chapter from the Psalms, one from the Proverbs, and one from a New Testament book that I was studying. Now, I usually spend a lot of time during the week reading and re-reading the book where the text for the Sunday sermon is. Maybe reading a lot of the whole of scripture would be helpful. Maybe you just need to study through one book and give your all to that, such as Romans. There is nothing set in stone. But you should think about it and make a plan. Lastly, stick to your plan. A plan that you don’t follow will profit no one.

1. Meditate

We will talk more in-depth about this next week, but I do want to mention it here. Meditation is important because our minds are so cluttered that it is easy to read a long passage of scripture (or anything else for that matter) and not remember two hours later what it was that you read. If this is the case with you then you won’t get very much out of your time in the Word. You won’t find yourself being conformed to the image of Christ if you can’t remember what His Word says and you certainly won’t know the Lord better. Remember the goal from our definition of a quiet time: To know God more, to know ourselves in light of Him and to see the world from His perspective. Perhaps our short memories and short attention spans are a product of the Fall, or perhaps they are just a reminder to us that we are not God (in that we have to work at trying to remember important things whereas He knows all). Either way, you will probably not remember a thing if you don’t single out a portion of your reading to focus on throughout this day. Pick out one word, phrase, verse or idea from the text and think about it more deeply than you have read the rest of the passage. That’s what meditation is. It is focusing on something that you might know it better. This might even entail asking a few questions: Why did God say this? What does this tell me about God? Is there a way that I can specifically apply this to my life today?

**Lastly, we should also briefly mention the role of the Holy Spirit in our hearing and reading God’s Word. In John 14:26, Jesus speaks of how the Holy Spirit “will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you”. The Holy Spirit, who dwells within us as believers, will teach us the truth as we spend time in God’s Word. We’ll unpack this more next week, but what a promise!**

Question: What suggestions do you have for others in class for growing in regularly meeting with God through reading Scripture?

(Close in prayer)