

*Reflecting on the Word*  
*Series: Catalysts for Spiritual Growth*  
*Isaiah 55:8-11 and various others*  
*January 11, 2009*

We began the New Year last week by talking about priorities, in particular, priorities for spiritual growth. My desire is that this would be a year of growing spiritually for every single person here. Jesus' priorities for us were that we would love God, love people, and make disciples. Jesus did not invite people merely to believe in Him. He invited people to *follow* Him. There is a *huge* difference between these two. One involves only one's head. The other, one's heart and life. Jesus didn't tell His followers to go to church. He told them to *be* disciples that *make* disciples, to invite others to follow Jesus and show them how to do it. God intends for you to grow in your relationship with Him. Believing in Jesus is not a destination; it is the beginning of a journey. A spiritual journey that will last the rest of your life here on earth.

So I asked you last week to consider three questions that are meant to help you evaluate your relationship with God and set some priorities for how you want to grow and where you will go with God in 2009. The first question was this: Where are you now? I hope you have thought about this this week. We talked about a spiritual continuum that has been identified, various stages along the journey. Where are you now? The next question, then, is, of course, Where do you want to be? Once you determine where you are and where you want to be, you need to know how to get from point A to point B. So the question then is: What's next for me to move from exploring Christ to growing in Christ, to close to Christ? What's next? Listen: Spiritual growth is not just for Jesus freaks or super saints. The ministers and the elders. The priests and the nuns. God expects *every one* of His children to grow. And that's what we expect, too. We expect you to do more than just show up on Sunday and sit in the pew and get your blessing. We expect you to grow.

How will we know if we're growing? We're defining spiritual growth this way: You know you are growing spiritually if you are growing in your love for God and growing in your love for people. Over these next 7 weeks, we are going to speak about 7 practices that will help you grow as a follower of Jesus. We're calling this series: *Catalysts for Spiritual Growth*. Catchy, huh?? A catalyst is something that makes change happen. That's right, I used the 'C' word: change. Following Jesus involves change – nothing less than personal transformation. Because following Jesus involves becoming more and more like Him. I'm pretty sure that will require some serious personal transformation for you. In my case, it requires something more like a miracle.

A catalyst is something that makes change happen. These 7 practices we're going to talk about are spiritual habits that will help you to grow in your love for God and your love for people. In other words, they will cause you to change, to become more God-focused and less me-focused; to become more other-centered and less self-centered; to fall more in love with God your Father; to follow more and more in the steps of Jesus. Now, there is no 'one size fits all' for spiritual growth. What helps you to grow may be different than what helps me. But there are some practices, many of which have been around the church for millennia, that we know will lead to a deeper relationship with God and a more loving relationship with others.

The traditional way of referring to these practices is as spiritual *disciplines*. Ah, discipline, there's a word we don't much like. But make no mistake: we're not talking about dabbling in Christianity. In 1 Tim. 4:7, Paul says to Timothy, and he says to us: "Train yourself to be godly." NAU: "Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness." We're not talking about dabbling in Christianity, playing church. We're talking about training ourselves like an athlete trains, disciplining ourselves to become the men and women God created us to be. Because don't forget, church, *this* is how God intends to change the world. *Through us*. There is no plan B. We're it.

I referred last week to some research that has been done recently. This research produced the spiritual continuum we have been referring to. This research looked not only at the various stages of spiritual growth, but also the catalysts for spiritual growth. No matter where you find yourself along the continuum, the number one factor influencing spiritual growth is reflection on Scripture. The Bible is the most powerful catalyst for spiritual growth. Reflecting on the meaning of Scripture in your life is the highest impact spiritual practice you can engage in. It is the most influential, no matter where you are on the continuum. If you want to know God and live a godly life, if you want to grow in your love for God and your love for people, you need to spend time with the Word of God. Biggest ROI is in the Scriptures. Joshua 1:8, Psalm 1:1-3.

What does that mean? How do I meditate on the Scriptures? The Hebrew word often translated 'meditate' means moan, growl, or mutter. Like a lion growling over its prey, the low murmur of a dove, or a cow chewing its cud. Reflecting or meditating on Scripture is thinking deeply on the truths and spiritual realities revealed in Scripture. Meditation is absorption. Meditation or reflection uses the Word of God as a mirror to reflect the truth of Scripture on your actions and decisions, and the events of your life. Heb. 4:12; 2 Tim. 3:16-17. This is not about skimming a passage or reading a short devotional in a mechanical way. Tea bag illustration: The longer the tea bag steep in the water, the stronger the tea. The longer the Scriptures steep in the water of your mind and heart, the stronger influence they will have on your life. The more they will 'flavor' your mind and heart and life.

Reflection centers on internalizing and personalizing the passage. The written word becomes a living word addressed to you. Isaiah 55:10-11. Reflection is different from study. Don't get me wrong, study is necessary. Bible study will get you lots of interesting information. But we don't need more information: There's tons of information out there – information overload, the internet. What we need is not more information, what we need it *transformation*: Romans 12:2: Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but *be transformed by the renewing of your mind.* *NLT*: "Let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think." Phil. 4:8.

Reflecting on the Scripture helps us to see things from God's perspective. In study, the priority is interpretation: *What does this mean?* In reflection on Scripture, the priority is application: *What does this mean for me?* The purpose of reflecting on Scripture is to open yourself to how God may be speaking to you in and through any particular text. It requires unhurried time and an open and unhurried heart. And I don't know if I know *anybody* who isn't hurried most of the time. Whose heart and mind aren't filled up with things all the time. You see, the most difficult problem is not finding time to spend with the Bible; time is not your problem. Your problem is

convincing yourself that it is important enough to set aside the time. If you want to experience the kind of life change that is available through reflecting on the Scriptures, you're gonna have to make it a priority. Hurry and busyness are enemies of a life of spiritual growth and change. Someone once said: "Hurry is not *of* the devil; hurry *is* the devil."

Now, you cannot learn to reflect or meditate from a book or a sermon. You learn to reflect by reflecting. But I do want to give you some suggestions for how to go about it; you will have to find what really works best for you.

One process is to first, Choose the verse, phrase, or word that strikes you most as you read a portion of Scripture. Then Repeat it in different ways: *I am the resurrection and the life.* (John 11:25) Think deeply about the truth that comes to your mind each time the verse is repeated in a different way. Next, Rewrite it in your own words. Paraphrasing the verse or phrase is a good way to make sure you understand it. Finally, Look for application. Ask yourself: "How am I to respond to this text? What ought I to *do* as a result of what God says in this verse/passage?"

John Ortberg suggests these steps: First, Ask God to meet you in the Scripture. Then, Read the Bible in a repentant spirit. Be willing to surrender to the Bible. In other words, don't expect the Bible to conform to you. Be willing to conform your life to it. Don't look so much for something to learn or something to comfort or encourage you; look for what you can obey. Meditate on a fairly brief passage. Go slowly. Take your time. Read the Bible like you would read a love letter from your beloved. When a word or phrase strikes you, let it sink into your heart. Ask: "God, what do you want to say to me right now?" Then sit still, and *listen*. Take one thought or verse with you through the day. Meditate on it "day and night." For example: Psalm 46:10: *Be still and know that I am God.*

Finally, Allow this thought to become part of your memory. Ortberg: "Memorizing Scripture is one of the most powerful means of transforming our minds." Psalm 119:11: *"I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.* Memorize what will help you most. What do you struggle with? Anger? Memorize Prov. 29:11: *"A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control."* Fear: Psalm 27:1: *"The LORD is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?"* Pride: Phil. 2:3: *"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit but in humility consider others better than yourselves."*

No matter where you are in your spiritual journey along the continuum, there is nothing that matters more to your spiritual growth – not church services, not serving in ministry, not even being in a small group – there is nothing that makes more impact, is a bigger catalyst for spiritual growth than time spent in the Bible. *Nothing*. "Jesus loves me, *this I know*, for the Bible tells me so." If we really got a hold of this, it would surely change our lives, and maybe even our world.

Now, here's where the rubber really meets the road. All this reflecting and growth is not merely for our own benefit. We have a responsibility to others, church. We have a responsibility to Bennett. Not only to tell him who God is, how much God loves him, but to show him. It's not only Derek and Yvonne's responsibility, it's our job, too, church. We made that promise today. We got him good and wet when we baptized him. This is just the beginning for him. What will

really change his life is to be totally immersed in God's love and grace through a knowledge of and love for the Scriptures. He'll have to get that from us.

So with regard to the practice of reflecting on the Scriptures, *Where are you now? Where do you want to be?* You don't have to start out running a marathon. Just take baby steps, but at least you'll move. If you do this it *will* change you: It will change the way you think about God and about yourself and about other people and about the meaning and purpose of life. It will change your attitudes and your behaviors. And so it will change your life. *It will.* But don't take *my* word for it. Look it up.