

Reflecting on Scripture Colossians 3:16

In *The Madonnas of Leningrad* Debra Dean tells about the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad, Russia during World War II. As the Nazis laid siege to Leningrad, the Hermitage staff packed up and evacuated 1.1 million pieces of art in case the museum was bombed. This was a labor of love by the museum staff who actually lived in the basement of the Hermitage during the siege. Most of the paintings were removed from their frames and rolled up in paper and packed in crates to be evacuated. Interestingly, the empty picture frames were hung back on the walls as a pledge that the paintings would one day return.

Accounts tell us that during the war Russian soldiers who came back to Leningrad from the front would sometimes come to the Hermitage. Some of the tour guides knew the paintings so well that they could give tours with just the empty picture frames hanging on the wall. The paintings were so etched into their minds and hearts that they would point out features and colors and tell the story of the paintings in moving detail. These descriptions flowed from such a deep place that “visitors could almost see them” (appendix of *Madonnas of Leningrad* by Debra Dean).

What if the teachings of Jesus captivated our hearts and minds in similar fashion? What if the teachings of Jesus were like paintings etched into our memories to the point where they captivated the deep places of our hearts, moving us to action? That was Jesus’ intention all along. Jesus told His disciples that His word should “abide” in them – it should be right at home in their minds/hearts. The teachings of Christ can captivate us to the point where they inform what we think, say, and do. Today we are going to begin discussing the means we utilize to see that happen.

In our sermon series on “The Word” we’ve already discussed a compelling VISION for the Word: understanding that the God’s Word is as important as food and that the Scriptures equip us to live the life He’s called us to live. In light of that reality, we also discussed INTENTION: making it our intention to engage the Scriptures and even the intention (ahead of time) to live out what God teaches us. Without this intention experiencing God through the Scriptures gets crowded out by many other things (some good and some bad).

Vision and intention aren’t enough; we also need practical, reliable MEANS that help us experience God through the Word. These are the practices, habits, and disciplines that we employ because we so want to be nourished and equipped by God. These are the things we actually do so that the word of God captivates our hearts, so that the Scriptures accompany us wherever we go.

The first “means” we’re going to discuss is ***reflecting on Scripture***. Sometimes reflecting on Scripture is called meditation. The Scriptures don’t really tell us how to reflect on Scripture, but they do describe what is supposed to happen when we reflect on Scripture. So we’ll first consider a key passage and then three images which

describe reflecting on Scripture. Once we have these Scriptures firmly in our minds, we'll then talk about a very basic, practical way to reflect on Scripture.

The fruit of reflecting on Scripture:

In Colossians 3:16 Paul gives a command which describes the fruit that reflecting on Scripture can bear in your life and subsequently in the lives of those around you.

16 Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

Our experience with the *word* of Christ is the foundation for our ability to influence each other. "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you." This is a corporate command to which we should individually respond. The "word of Christ" includes the accounts of Christ's life, the teachings of Christ we find in the gospels, as well as the doctrines about Christ we find in the writings of the apostles. Ultimately it refers to the entirety of Scripture.

As the body of Christ, the cupboards of our hearts are to be stocked full of spiritual truth – the "word of Christ." The word of Christ is to be so deeply embedded in our lives that it informs our thinking and behavior. As we let the word of Christ richly dwell within us, we have the capacity "with all wisdom" to "teach and admonish one another." To teach is to communicate in such a way that others learn. To admonish is to challenge and plead with others to be faithful to God. If the word of Christ richly dwells within you, you will have this capacity to teach and admonish others.

Paul specifically mentions using "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs." When our hearts are saturated with the word of Christ, the songs we sing have a special power to teach and challenge. It's intangible in many ways, but we gain something when we hear others worshipping God from the heart. When I see and hear others singing praises to God from the heart ("like they mean it") something stirs within me. I'm taught and admonished by what we're singing.

Notice in this verse that even though we are teaching and admonishing each other through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, God is our primary audience: "singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God." Singing is an opportunity to express back to God His worth in the presence of others who need to do the same. At the same time, we "teach and admonish" others who are present.

Even though Paul doesn't mention it here, it seems obvious that this teaching and admonishing will also happen in the context of conversations. In community there is ample opportunity to teach and admonish one another. This is much different than merely quoting Bible verses to people with problems; this is a wise, thoughtful, compassionate way of talking with people about the issues they face. This is a specific way that Scripture makes us adequate and equipped for every good work.

What Paul describes in this verse won't happen unless we reflect thoughtfully on Scripture over an extended period of time. Wouldn't you like to be the type of person who has the mind of Christ and who is able to share the word of Christ with others? That's ***the fruit of reflecting on Scripture***.

[It's not really possible to make fine distinctions between "psalms," "hymns," and "spiritual songs." The term psalm was used of the OT book of Psalms (see Luke 24:44). Hymns and spiritual songs would have been composed by Christians after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Taken together these three terms suggest *variety* and *richness* in the music of the church. Our music should give expression to the word of Christ that we treasure in our hearts.]

Images of reflecting on Scripture:

We find throughout Scripture rich images that describe reflecting on Scripture. These images suggest how we go about letting the word of Christ richly dwell within us. Here are three images:

"Treasure" (Psalm 119:11) In Psalm 119:11 the psalmist wrote this:

11 Your word I have treasured in my heart,
That I may not sin against You.

Other translations read, "I have stored up your word in my heart" (ESV) or "I have hidden your word in my heart" (NIV). Remember that biblically speaking the "heart" is the command and control center of a person's life. The psalmist had treasured or stored up God's word in the place where it could inform the rest of his life. Specifically, he treasured God's word in his heart so that he "may not sin against" God. The word was such an abiding presence that it pushed him toward obedience instead of sin.

This image suggests that we should allow the Scriptures to occupy a central place in our thinking. Instead of a superficial knowledge of God's word, we engage it to the point where it has a permanent, abiding place in our hearts.

"Meditate" (Psalm 1:2)

Psalm 1 describes the blessing a person experiences as s/he intentionally reflects on Scripture throughout the day. Consider the first three verses:

1 How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,
Nor stand in the path of sinners,
Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!
2 But his delight is in the law of the Lord,
And in His law he meditates day and night.
3 He will be like a tree *firmly* planted by streams of water,
Which yields its fruit in its season
And its leaf does not wither;
And in whatever he does, he prospers.

When you delight in something you think about it all the time; you probably talk about it whenever you get the chance. It's never far from your mind or your lips. You don't have to be poked and prodded to think and talk about it. I get this way about woodworking sometimes; whenever I get a break, I'm back out in the shop. That's the attitude toward the Scriptures we find in Psalm 1. He's describing a person with a compelling vision for what the Word might mean in his life.

The person who delights in the Scriptures, very naturally "meditates day and night" - meaning all the time; it's not an infrequent, occasional activity. The term translated "meditate" has a variety of different connotations. It can mean to murmur or mutter something over and over. That's what we do when we meditate: we murmur to ourselves (even out loud) a verse or phrase of Scripture. "Be still and know that I am God. . . . be still . . . be still . . . be still . . ." John Ortberg says that if you can worry, you can meditate; it's the same process of mulling something over and over in your mind.

In Isaiah 31 the term "meditate" is used of a lion "growling over" its prey. The lion is savoring a goat or a sheep it has killed. A lion meditates on a goat by chewing and swallowing it. This is a picture of how we should approach the Scriptures. We settle in and slowly, deliberately assimilate the Scriptures in the depths of our being. Instead of gulping it down and getting on to the next thing, we growl over the Scriptures. We mull it over in our minds until the "word of Christ richly dwells within us."

"Eat this book" (Ezekiel 3:1-3, Revelation 10:9-10)

We find this image in Ezekiel 3:1-3. God is talking to the prophet, telling him to internalize the message before he speaks it to the nation.

1 Then He said to me, "Son of man, eat what you find; eat this scroll [or book], and go, speak to the house of Israel." 2 So I opened my mouth, and He fed me this scroll. 3 He said to me, "Son of man, feed your stomach and fill your body with this scroll which I am giving you." Then I ate it, and it was sweet as honey in my mouth.

The prophet was supposed to "eat this book" - taste it, swallow it, digest it. He was supposed to metabolize the message to the point where it became his own. Subsequently, this message from God would come through Ezekiel's life; it became part of him. When you and I "eat this book," we feast on it so that it becomes part of us.

In light of the prospect that the Word of God might dwell richly within us and in light of these images, let's consider ***A practical approach to reflecting on Scripture.***

When we reflect on Scripture, I'd suggest the simple grid of pondering the ***meaning*** and the ***significance*** of the passage. This is basically what Brian and I do every week when we preach a passage of Scripture. We spend time studying and thinking about the meaning of the passage and then its significance for us as a church.

Meaning: Think about the author's original meaning. (Pay attention to context, words, images, etc.) This is obviously a huge topic, but the basic idea is clear. The authors of Scripture meant something when they wrote what they did. It's just not true that "you can get the Bible to say anything you want" - not unless you violate normal, accepted principles of grammar and interpretation. When we reflect on Scripture, we first want to think about the meaning - what the author meant by what was written.

Significance: Think about the significance of this passage for your life and for the body of Christ. (Think about the implications for your life.) This is where you ask the question, "So what? What is the significance of this passage for me and others in the body of Christ?" In this step we take the Scripture very personally. We assume that God wants to nourish, teach, correct, and equip us through His Word. And so we ask the types of questions that invite God to speak directly to us. In this way we "let God be God" in our lives.

I want to give you an example of what it might look like to reflect on Scripture using this simple, practical approach. What I'm about to share is a summary of my meditation on Matthew 11:28–30 this past week. This is just a summary; I'm not as fast or as good as it might seem. I spent about 45 minutes murmuring and growling over this text. I used the suggested pattern from the reading guide we distributed (available on the counter in the foyer): Pray, read, reflect, respond.

By the way, some of you have mentioned that because you have a simple reading plan in front of you, you're reading the Scripture consistently for the first time in a long time. Others of you aren't doing the reading plan, and that's completely fine. I find that in certain seasons a formal reading plan is great for me (it gives me structure, I don't have to think about what I'll read each day, etc.); other times the idea of a reading plan wears me out. It's completely fine if you're not doing the reading plan.

Here's my meditation on Matthew 11:28-30 using the pattern pray, read, reflect, respond.

Pray: God, here I am this morning. I want to hear Your voice through the Word. I feel weak. . . I need the nourishment that Your Word can give me. I need you to correct the way I think and speak and act. I believe you want to do that through the Scriptures. Deep down I really want to receive from You this morning; and deep down I want to experience whatever You show me through Your Word.

*But, God, my mind is racing. I'm thinking about all the things I need to do today (appointments, emails, that pesky sermon I need to prepare, that phone call I don't want to make). I'm thinking about that guy who is disappointed in me. I'm feeling a little guilty over what I said to that person yesterday. My mind is racing. Thanks that You know about all these things. I cast ALL my anxieties on You, knowing that you care for me. During **this** time I want to hear Your voice. Amen.*

Read:

28 "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. 29 "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

Reflect:

Meaning. *Who was Jesus talking about when He said, "weary and heavy-laden"? What does heavy-laden mean anyway? Oh, the NIV says "burdened" - that helps. I guess Jesus was talking about tax-collectors and sinners - people burdened by the guilt of their sin and by other people's judgment of them. He must have been talking about the poor - weary from their work and from the anxiety of just "making it." He must have been talking about the blind and the lame and the deaf since that's who came to Him.*

"I will give you rest" . . . I wonder what that means. . . Whatever rest means, it's not being passive because people find rest as they "take His yoke" and "learn from Him." Jesus is talking about being His disciple. And so the life of a disciple is a life of rest. But that's a strenuous life, a life of sacrifice and service. Hmhmhmhm. . . If you're a disciple of Jesus, you can have rest even though you are pouring out your life for others.

"I am gentle and humble in heart." Wow, Jesus isn't harsh and arrogant toward weary, burdened people. "My yoke is easy and My burden is light." I'm not quite sure what that means. Maybe that needs to be experienced to be understood.

Significance. *Jesus, I am so weary and burdened so often. I may look carefree to others, but You and I know better, don't we? If I come to You, would you really give me rest in my soul? Is it possible for me to be a pastor AND to have rest in my soul? I have to assume that You're making this offer to me too, right?*

I have to admit that my weariness isn't from my discipleship - as if learning from You is wearing me out. My weariness comes from avoiding You and ignoring You and running from You (at times). God, I've known this Scripture for a long time, but I feel like I have barely experienced the type of rest Jesus offers. Thank You that Jesus is gentle and humble in heart. That makes me want to come to Him.

Response. *Jesus, I come to You. By the grace of God, I take up Your yoke. I want to learn from You. Show me how this life is a life of rest. Please show me what it means for me to have "rest in my soul." I pray that today I would notice when it is there and when it isn't. Give me the will to keep coming to You. Thank You for being gentle and humble in heart. Amen.*

I think I'll write Jesus' promise on a sticky note and put it above my desk as a reminder: "I will give you rest. Jesus."

Hopefully that gives you a taste of how you might reflect on Scripture in a way that allows the word of Christ to richly dwell within you. If you went back to a Scripture like that every Monday for four weeks, that Scripture might really captivate your heart and mind. You might assimilate it to the point where you can naturally use it to "teach and admonish" others. You might be talking with a friend who is going through a tough situation and you are able to say with conviction, "Jesus offers rest to weary people. I've experienced it myself. Jesus offers rest to weary people as we walk with Him."

My encouragement to you this week is simply, "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you."