

Growing closer to God through his Word

We don't typically view the study of the Word relationally, but more intellectually, scientifically, grammatically, culturally and historically. To be sure, all of those disciplines come to our aid in understanding the meaning of the text for the original reader and then for us. However, because the Bible is God's Word—his communication to us—we cannot rightly approach the Bible apart from relationship with its Author. This viewpoint is not optional but foundational for studying God's Word.

I would further add, that if we come to God's Word with a purpose other than getting to know him better, we may be studying it for the wrong reasons. Even a life time of study will not unearth all the gems that God's Word has to offer us. But those gems are not merely "nuggets of knowledge" but jewels of God's character and works through which we can know, love and enjoy him better.

The danger is great to treat the study of the Word as an end in itself, rather than a means to knowing Christ deeper. We are in jeopardy of gauging our spirituality by the intensity of our study rather than by the degree to which we are becoming more like Jesus. When it comes to study of the Word we are prone not to heed the Word when it warns, "Knowledge puffs up."

In 1 Corinthians 8:1-3 (NLT) Paul explains, "But while knowledge makes us feel important, it is love that strengthens the church. Anyone who claims to know all the answers doesn't really know very much. But the person who loves God is the one whom God recognizes."

For these reasons, I will present the relational grace of studying God's Word in terms of a cycle that emphasizes the relational nature of studying the Word.¹ (Please see next page.)

¹ *Strategies for Life Coaching*, ChangePoint, 2005, p. 43.

Growing in God's Word

Always come to God's Word expecting to meet with Him!



Notice the various elements of this cycle: we come to God's Word with the expectation of meeting with him. He communicates and meets with us in his Word. His Holy Spirit is at work through his Word and in our lives to give us understanding and application to our lives. The Holy Spirit convicts us and gives us the desire to know, enjoy and follow Jesus Christ.

The three distinct phases of this cycle include exploring God's Word in which we apply the principles of hermeneutics and Bible study methods. We cannot and must not leave our interaction with God's Word at that phase. There is too great a risk of walking away simply with a head full of knowledge and an arrogance about it that will damage rather than cultivate relationships. Meditation helps us personalize God's Word in our lives, but meditation is not solely devotional. Often, God's Spirit reveals the meaning of a passage to us through meditation that had escaped us in study. Meditation is a rich, living interaction with the Lord about his Word.

Meditation means to chew on, mull over, ponder, or consider. There are many ways in which we can meditate on a passage of Scripture. One of my favorite methods for meditating is to dialog with the Lord about the passage by posing open-ended questions or testing a proposition based on the passage. In this phase I also agree with the Lord about what he's saying that applies to me. I'll give examples of these techniques below.

Finally, we submit to God's Word when we align our lives with him, making his Word the path of our lives. James warns us what happens without this phase in the cycle of growing in God's Word. "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." (James 1:22) Merely exposing ourselves to the Word, but not acting on it deceives us into thinking we share an intimacy with God that is not there. (See John 5:37-40.)

Let's apply the Growing in God's Word cycle to a passage of Scripture. Look at Luke 10:38-42:

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Again, as we come to God's Word we want to meet with him and draw near to him. "Lord, thank you for this window into the lives of these two women and Jesus. Reveal yourself to us in this account and perform your life-changing work in us as a result of our drawing near to you. In Jesus' name, amen."

Below I've bulleted some key points that we could glean from this passage as we move through the three phases of the Growing in God's Word model. These are not intended to be exhaustive.

Phase 1: Explore God's Revelation

- This story we find only in Luke's Gospel
- The account probably occurs sometime in the middle of Jesus' ministry
- Martha and Mary are presumably the same two women who are sisters of Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead in John 11
- The village referred to here would be Bethany (John 11:1), which lies just a few miles east of Jerusalem
- Although this may have been Jesus' first meeting with this family, by the time Lazarus died Jesus referred to him as a friend and John's Gospel implies close relationships with the family (see John 11)
- Later, just prior to Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, he visits this home again. This time Mary anoints Jesus' feet with expensive perfume and wiped his feet with her hair (John 12:1-3)
- According to Luke 10:38, Martha extended the invitation to Jesus and opened "her home" to him
- Martha's sister Mary "sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said" – the expression "to sit at someone's feet" means to be that person's apprentice or disciple (see Acts 22:3)
- "But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made." According to verse 38, Jesus' disciples were with him. Whether they merely stayed for a meal or spent a night or several days with Martha and Mary, there would have been significant preparations for 13 men! Luke does not suggest that these preparations need not have been made, but simply that they distracted Martha from Jesus.

- Martha's distraction from Jesus moved her focus to her preparations and herself. This resulted in Martha's anger toward her sister Mary for not helping her *and* toward Jesus for "not caring that her sister had left her to do all the work by herself." Martha's anger even drives her to demand that Jesus tell Mary to help her.
- Jesus responds tenderly, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her." Martha was worried and she was upset about many things.

Phase 2: Meditate on God's Revelation

- Even though Martha later became distracted, she seems to have started out on the right foot since she is the one that opened her home to Jesus. I know there are times when I start out right and then botch things up later with a self-centered attitude.
- Put in other words, Martha became distracted in serving the Lord. Could it be that one of the telltale signs of distraction is a preoccupation with self? Martha's distractions over her preparations led to her preoccupation with herself.
- Preoccupation with self damages my relationships with others and with the Lord. Pride is a life lived in judgment of others. Wow! Lord, I can see there is no joy in that kind of lifestyle!
- Lord, I'm also amazed to think how easy it is for us to move from genuine service, to preoccupation with self, to destructive pride! How insidious is that transition and the fact that it occurs under the guise of humility! (E.g., "Poor me, I'm doing all the work!")
- Lord, I don't think you're saying by this story that there's never a time for service to you and making the kind of preparations Martha was making. But under the circumstances (Jesus is there teaching) there was an infinitely more valuable opportunity. Mary had grabbed it (she "had chosen what is better") and Martha was missing it! What Martha was doing was "good", but what Mary pursued was "better"!
- Lord, sometimes we make so much of our service to you, when what would really honor you is to allow you to serve us. In fact, not to allow you to serve us dishonors you!

Phase 3: Align Your Life with God

- Lord, like Martha I want to start well, but I want to finish well also. Please keep me from preoccupation with self!
- God, I desperately need your wisdom to be able to discern when my service *for you* becomes a distraction *from you!*
- Lord Jesus, help me to realize that any time I become preoccupied with myself, I am working contrary to you. In following you, you call me to deny myself daily. I do that now.
- Lord, I want to be preoccupied with you. I want to sit at your feet and learn from you. I want to listen to you. Keep me from other distractions!
- Father, I desire you. I want to always choose what is better.

- Lord, reveal to me right now areas in my life for which I am worried, upset or distracted. I will set aside time with you often to sit at your feet and listen to you without distraction from other things.

As I mentioned earlier, I've found through practice with this model that it is often in the meditation and alignment phases where God reveals to me the clear meaning of the text. And again, just as the Luke 10 text teaches, we need to come to Jesus to get to know him and become more like him. Simply entertaining him in our "home" does not impress him!

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