Believe: *Why Study God’s Word?*

2 Timothy 3:16-17

To be a Christian, among other things, means that we are to be like Christ. We are to think like Christ, act like Christ, and be like Christ. That’s what this BELIEVE series is all about. We began the series by examining what Jesus believed, what we believe and why should we conform our thoughts to His thoughts. Now, we are looking at what it means to act like Jesus. Let me ask you a question: When I suggest that we should act like Jesus, what comes to your mind? Take a minute and tell your neighbor. What comes to your mind when I say, “We should act like Jesus”?

For most of us, when we think of “acting like Jesus,” we think of those defining moments in Jesus’ life when He loved deeply, taught profoundly, gave generously, fought Satan courageously, and suffered faithfully. When we read about the life of Jesus in the Gospels, we are moved in our spirits and we say, “I want to live that way.” And then we try it…we try doing those things that Jesus did when He was on the spot…in those highlighted moments of His career…and we fall flat on our faces. We soon discover that to live like Jesus is hard, unnatural, and perhaps even impossible for us.

But should we be surprised? If I had the time, I should very much like to show you a video of my son’s piano recital. All of my sons are quite talented musicians, but my oldest son Levi has acquired exceptional skills when it comes to the piano. Now, should you watch Levi play the piano, you may say to yourself, “I would very much like to make music on the piano like Levi.” But should you then walk over to the piano and begin to play, I suspect most of us would discover that we are ill-equipped to play like Levi. And the harder we try, the more frustrated we will become. Why? Because most of us have not spent thousands of hours at piano lessons, playing scales, learning and practicing hundreds of different pieces, mastering the complex code of music theory, and so on. Emotionally and idealistically, we would wish to play the piano. But to actually play the piano, particularly as beautifully as my son, we would have to begin living our lives differently every day, right? We would have to humble ourselves to become students of the piano. We would need a teacher or two. We would need to make choices about our time, our study habits, our concentration, and our priorities. And then we would need to practice, practice, practice…right?

Such is the case when it comes to living as Jesus lived. We must first realize and appreciate that Jesus performed beautifully when put on the spot as a consequence of the way Jesus practiced life all the time. In other words, His performance revealed His practices.

That is what we are now exploring: the practices of Jesus. We already looked at the practice of worship and prayer. This morning we will look at the practice of studying God’s Word.

Now, before we go there, let me remind you that we are actually NOT talking about playing the piano! That’s a decent illustration, but probably more intimidating than it needs to be! To live as
Jesus lived will require us to practice life as Jesus did, but these are not practices that we cannot do. We can all worship God, pray, and study the scriptures. We need no special degrees or raw talent, we need only follow Jesus where He leads us. So...remember, the pathway to spiritual growth always begins where you are. Please do not despair or become discouraged if these spiritual disciplines are currently not happening in your life. Instead, imagine a time that you will be required to forgive, to turn the other cheek, to love generously, to resist temptation, to endure suffering, to persevere when persecuted for your faith...and be encouraged that these spiritual practices that we are learning about today will equip you to be prepared and to perform under fire in the days to come...and those days are coming, right?

Now, let us turn our attention to the spiritual practice of Bible study. Again, there is much to learn about this subject, and I have just a few minutes. So, I will present my thoughts to you under three subheadings: 1) the purpose of Bible-study; 2) the practice of Bible-study; and 3) the picture of Bible-study.

I. The Purpose of Bible-study
When writing to his young student, Timothy, the Apostle Paul had this to say about the study of scripture: 16 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

Did you hear how Paul identified the purpose of Bible-study?

1) We hear God speak through the Bible. This is what Paul meant when he said that all scripture is “breathed out by God.” God still speaks through His Word, so reading the Bible is the best way to get to know God in terms of who He is and how He is.

2) Paul encourages Timothy to study the scriptures so that he will know what to teach and how to reproof and correct those under his influence. Parents, how do you teach your children what is right and what is wrong? Do you base your morality upon the shifting sands of our ever-changing culture, or do you root the moral conscience of your children in the unchanging revelation of God’s Word? The Psalmist asks, “How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your Word.” I remember when one of my sons was going through a time of temptation and potentially harmful habits. I felt strongly that what he was doing was wrong, but I knew that articulating my opinion on the matter would likely lead to a debate...and quite frankly, I struggled with the same temptation. So, I wrote down 14 passages of scripture that made clear what God thought about the subject, and I asked my son to memorize those scriptures—not as a punishment—but so that he would be equipped with the truth about what God said. I told him that ultimately, he was accountable to God, and so it was imperative that he knew what God had to say about the subject. To this day, I think that was my best decision as a father. God’s Word has greater authority than my opinion or even that of the United States Supreme Court. The Word of God is the authority for teaching, reproof, and correction.
3) Paul writes that the Word of God helps us in “training for righteousness.” Again, notice the word “training.” When we study the Bible, we are training our minds to think like God. We are training our minds as to the way to live RIGHTLY in our relationship with God and our relationships with others. There has been a lot of science done on the brain, and we now know that the brain is actually trained by that which we rehearse and concentrate on. Richard Foster writes, “The ingrained habits of thought that are formed will conform to the order of the thing being studied. What we study determines the kind of habits that are formed.” Paul didn’t need modern science to observe this reality, which is why he instructed the church in Philippi, “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” We study scripture as a means of training ourselves to think right and to live right…such is what Paul meant with the words, “training in righteousness.”

4) Paul concludes by writing that the study of scriptures helps the believer to be “complete” and “equipped for every good work.” The Greek verb used here in 2 Timothy for “complete” also means “adequate.” In other words, through the study of God’s Word, we will become adequate to do those things that God has planned for us to do in our short lives. We will be equipped to respond to those situations that we are confronted with when life happens. Think about Jesus in the desert as He is being tempted by Satan. We read in Luke 4 that Satan first tempts Jesus with the bodily appetites, but Jesus overcomes that temptation by quoting scripture. Satan then tempts Jesus to take a shortcut by putting God to the test, but Jesus resists the temptation by quoting scripture. Satan finally tempts Jesus with power, position, and influence…and again, Jesus overcomes the temptation and wins the battle with Satan by quoting scripture. When the Word of God is within us…when our minds have been trained by what God has said…we will be adequate in the heat of battle…we will acquire the ability to do what needs to be done when it matters the most.

II. The Practice of Bible Study

There are many wonderful resources that can help us get the most out of our study of scripture. I recommend Gordon Fee’s How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth. I also enjoyed Richard Foster’s treatment of this subject in Celebration of Discipline. I’m not going to prescribe exactly how we should practice the study of scripture, but I do want to give you some practical direction for things to do and not to do when you read the Bible.

1) Ask the Holy Spirit to help you understand what you are reading. This is, hands down, the most important takeaway of my message. Without the Holy Spirit, we will likely NOT understand the Bible, and if we keep trying to read what we don’t understand, we’ll just stop reading it all together. Paul writes in 1 Cor. 2:14: The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.
People always ask me about my sermon writing process, particularly after they get to know me. I think it’s because, after hanging out with me for a while, they realize I’m not all that bright...even though my sermons often produce profound spiritual insights. And I would just say...Exactly! That is exactly what Paul is talking about in 1 Cor. 2, and that’s my point. Anybody can read the Bible...but to understand what God is saying through the Bible...to understand what it MEANS and how it applies to our lives, we need the Holy Spirit. In short, that’s the whole deal when it comes to my sermon preparation. I study, I read, all of that...but in the end, if there is even one profound insight that comes to you, rest assured that came from the Holy Spirit...not me.

Listen, so much of your spiritual growth hinges on reading the Bible, but please do not forget this critical imperative: ASK THE HOLY SPIRIT TO HELP YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU ARE READING!

2) Foster suggests that there are 4 steps to effective study, and I will encourage you to employ all four as you engage God’s Word.

First is something we already mentioned, and that is repetition. Foster writes, “Repetition regularly channels the mind in a specific direction, thus ingraining habits of thought.” Listen to the insightful observation of the Psalmist in Psalm 1: Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. You would be amazed how your mind and your habits change by daily study of the scripture. To think about God’s Word once a week or once a month forfeits the value of repetition. Again, think about learning to play the piano. To practice one a week or once a month will not help you advance in your skills. But practice 30 minutes a day and you will be amazed how quickly you can progress as a piano player. The same is true for studying the Bible. Engage the Word on a regular basis, and your patterns of thinking and your daily habits will be transformed.

Next, says Foster, we must apply concentration to that which we are reading. Concentration is a hard commodity to come by in our high-tech, highly distracted culture. We pride ourselves at multi-tasking, and we almost thrive on the chaos and constant stimulation. But the truth is, it is very hard to learn things of value without concentration. In fact, we won’t UNDERSTAND...we won’t hear from the Spirit...without some degree of concentration. So when you study the Bible, perhaps it would be wise to leave your phone in another room, turn off the radio, and carve out a bit of time to truly concentrate on God’s Word.

The third step is comprehension. Jesus says in John 8:32 that the “knowledge of the truth” will set us free. Comprehension is often something we have to struggle for. We may need to engage in dialogue with others, read secondary resources, or simply wait for the Holy Spirit to help us understand what we have read. Don’t assume that you will automatically understand the truth and power of God’s Word on a first reading. Don’t assume that every verse should immediately apply to your life. Instead, seek to comprehend what God said, why He said it, who he said it to, how
they heard what He said, and how that relates to your life and our culture today. Comprehension takes time, but it’s worth the effort. When we truly comprehend God’s Word, it has the power to change our paradigms and our entire outlook on life. God’s Truth can and will literally set us free!

Which leads to the fourth aspect of study, which is reflection. Foster writes, “Although comprehension defines what we are studying, reflection defines the significance of what we are studying. In reflection, we come to understand not only our subject matter, but ourselves. When we ponder the meaning of what we study, we come to hear and see in a new way.”

Foster concludes with these words: “It soon becomes obvious that study demands humility. Arrogance and a teachable spirit are mutually exclusive.”

I can’t emphasize how true this statement is. I encounter people from time to time who ask me a question with no intent to learn. They are looking for an argument…they are looking to prove a point…they are looking for an opportunity to talk about themselves and justify their own position…but they are not open to learning. To be a student of Jesus is to be a lifetime learner…it is to remain humble and teachable.

When we announced that we were going to do the BELIEVE series, I had several people in our church who complained that they were too spiritually mature to get anything out of a series that was so basic. Some people have even stopped attending for that reason. Let me tell you something: that statement tells me a lot about their spiritual condition. It tells me that their study of scripture stops short of reflection. Listen: You may be great with repetition, concentration, and comprehension…but you are woefully lacking when it comes to personal reflection if you think that you are “spiritually mature,” or too spiritually mature for the ‘basics’ of the Christian life. I don’t even think of myself as too spiritually mature for this series, and I’m the Lead Pastor of the church! You see, like many of those who have been Christians for decades, I, too, am familiar with the content of this series, but the personal reflection is all new to me RIGHT NOW. I’m not who I was 10 years ago, or even one year ago! My life circumstances have changed, I’m battling different issues, and it’s the reflection on the significance of themes right now that is changing the way I see and hear everything else in my life. By the way, that’s always what Jesus does for people. Remember Luke 24 when Jesus comes alongside the disciples who were on the road to Emmaus. He didn’t give them new information; He helped them to comprehend and then reflect upon the significance of the information they already had. That’s true learning, and that’s the goal, amen?

So…as we practice reading scripture, I hope you’ll remember these tips: Ask the Spirit to help you understand what you are reading. And then practice the four steps of study: repetition, concentration, comprehension, and reflection. Again, reading scripture alone is helpful, but don’t underestimate the value of reading and discussing scripture with others in a small group setting. And read other books that help you unpack the biblical themes such as commentaries, Gordon Fee’s book that I mentioned earlier, and Christian classics along the lines of Mere Christianity by C.S. Lewis and so many other excellent works.

Now, we’ve looked at the purpose and practice of Bible-study. Let me quickly wrap up with some reflection on the Picture of Bible Study.
III. The Picture of Bible-Study

Within the Bible we find pictures and images associated with the Word of God. I will only expound on three images that I think are particularly powerful: 1) God’s Word as a Lamp; 2) God’s Word as a Meal; and 3) God’s Word as a Sword.

First, the Psalmist writes in Psalm 119:105, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” I love this imagery.

Just a few days ago Elder Jim Cannon and I delivered a generator to a family who was without power for three days. When we got there is was getting dark outside, and it was quite dark inside of the house. It was also cold, and I couldn’t help wondering how they had managed for the past three days in such cold and dark conditions. When we fired up the generator the very first thing that the homeowner did was to plug in a light, and when the light came on, it completely changed the atmosphere in the house! Light does that…particularly if you have been walking in darkness.

The mission of our church is to be the light of Christ in a hurting culture. I’m going to tell you right now: we have no hope of being the light without the LAMP of God’s Word burning brightly as a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Without the LAMP of God’s Word, we are going to run into those things that we can’t see, and that will frustrate our progress and any hope of helping the lost, the broken, and the fatherless.

Another biblical image of the Word is that it serves as a MEAL. Both Peter and Paul refer to the Word as food for our souls. 1 Peter 2:2, “Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation.” Paul writes in 1 Timothy 4:6—“Being nourished with the words of the faith.” Jeremiah said, “Your words were found and I ate them.” John eats the Word of God in Revelation 10, and Jesus states in Matthew 4:4, “Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that out of the mouth of God.”

We all understand hunger. We all understand appetite. We all get that when we are truly hungry, only food will satisfy that hunger. The same is true for your spirit. Remember, we are not bodies that have spirits. We are spirits who have bodies! Our spiritual identity and health is PRIMARY, and so feeding ourselves spiritual food is essential to our spiritual growth and well-being. According to the Bible, the Word of God is the meal that we are to feast upon. Just as food goes into our bodies and continues to bring its benefit, so also the Word of God, when taken in, continues to work in our spirits to bring about transformation. Such is why one of the spiritual disciplines that we find in scriptures and practiced throughout history is fasting. When we fast from physical food, we declare a season of FEASTING on spiritual food. For most of us, our norm is exactly the opposite, right? But FEASTING on spiritual food should be our norm, and when it becomes our primary source of nourishment, we can go long times without physical food. In John 4, when the disciples brought Jesus lunch, assuming he was famished, he declared, “I have food to eat of which you do not know…My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work.” God’s power and nourishment come through His Word, which leads to obedience and the work of God being accomplished. It is there that we will find a contentment that rivals the most extravagant meal you could ever imagine.
Finally, the Word of God is often envisioned as a SWORD. Hebrews 4:12: 12 For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

In Ephesians 6, Paul tells us to put on the whole armor of God. According to his description, the Word of God is the SWORD of the SPIRIT.

The sword is a powerful and dangerous weapon. Why would Paul equate the WORD of GOD with a weapon? Could it be because we are called to fight a spiritual battle that is both dangerous and hugely important? That is exactly what Paul tells us in Ephesians 6: “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil…”

Listen church, the battle for your soul is real. The battle for the souls of men, women, and children all throughout the world is real. Evil is real…and it’s more than ignorance or foolishness…it is a spiritual reality, and evil is personal. Jesus saved us to fight the good fight, and if you are going to fight a spiritual battle, you need spiritual weapons. Let me tell you something: the Word of God is absolutely a sword. It cuts through the lies to reveal the truth. It cuts through the self-deception to reveal what is actually going on inside of us. It cuts to the depth of us to reveal the condition of our hearts. And it cuts down the Enemy who desires to destroy us. Jesus fought Satan in the desert with the Word of God…it stands to reason we should do the same.

Make no mistake: the Word of God is absolutely a sword…but like any weapon, failure to learn how to use a sword properly is a sure way to hurt yourself and others! So let’s practice. Let’s spend time in the Word. Let’s learn what God has said. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you how to leverage the power of the Word to fight the good fight in your own soul, and then to contend for the souls of others.

Let’s pray.