

Meditation

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To me, one of the hardest things about being a preacher is seeing the world through different eyes than my own, and listening to myself with different ears than my own. Everything that I preach makes perfect sense to me, but that doesn't necessarily mean that it makes perfect sense to everybody else. In particular, I struggle to make my applications as specific and concrete as they could be. By nature, I'm an abstract, big-picture kind of guy, but I'm not very interested in the details. That's why, for instance, I do the long-range financial planning for our family, but Lauren writes the checks.

Recently, one of the members here pointed out to me that one of the details I skip over concerns the Biblical practice of meditation. Meditation is something that's spiritually important to me, I commend it to the brethren here regularly, but I've never really explained what it is or how to do it. This morning, then, let's consider meditation.

What and Why

As always, though, before we get down to the specifics, let's spend some time understanding what meditation is and why it's important to us. This, naturally, starts with a **DEFINITION**. We find a pretty good one in Psalm 77:6. This passage tells us that once the writer resolved to meditate in his heart, his spirit began a diligent search. This diligent inward search for truth is the concept that the Bible means to convey when it speaks of meditation.

This is important to remember because of the different ways that other religions define meditation. In many ways, those definitions have more effect on us than the definition of the Bible. When someone says "meditation", our first thought is of a guru on a mountaintop someplace, his eyes closed, sitting in the lotus position, and saying the sacred syllable, "Ommm." I've got a good friend who, even though he's got a Ph.D., likes to pretend that he's a redneck. He says that really, meditation is when you're sitting on your front porch in a rocking chair on a summer evening, and the dog's lying down here next to you, and the bug zapper's going over there, and you're staring off into space, saying the sacred syllable, "Ummm." Meditation isn't some exotic, highbrow practice. It's as common as dirt.

However, despite the common-ness of the practice, it's still an extremely important one. First, meditation helps us with **UNDERSTANDING** the Scriptures. Look at what the psalmist says about this in Psalm 119:99. As we say over and over again, reading the Bible is extremely important. It is the fuel for our spiritual fire. However, when we're dealing with the most profound book ever written, we can't think that we're going to get everything out of it that we need to from one read-through. The Bible is simply written, yes, but it is deceptively simple. Just about anybody can understand the what-must-I-do-to-be-saved parts pretty quickly, but the more we think about a particular passage, the more we see new insights that we had never before realized were there. What's more, as we come to a better understanding of the word, we start to make connections between different parts of the Bible, and those add layer upon layer of additional complexity. The Bible is like a kaleidoscope. It never runs out of new things to show us, and if we ever think we've got God's word figured out, that's a sure sign that we aren't spending enough time with it. The only way that we can ever hope to unravel even some of those mysteries is by spending some time in diligent inward search.

Second, meditation is important to our **OBEDIENCE**. God Himself reveals this to Joshua in Joshua 1:8. After all, being a disciple of Jesus isn't fundamentally about thinking profound thoughts. It's about transforming ourselves into the likeness of Christ. It's about doing. However, this doing has to start with meditation. This is true in at least two main ways. First of all, there are many areas of our spiritual lives where we have to synthesize texts from several different places to figure out God's will, and that synthesizing process is meditation. Take, for instance, the subject of Bible authority. The Scripture speaks in 2 Timothy 1 of the pattern of sound words that we are supposed to follow, both individually and as a congregation. There are those who deny that such a pattern exists because it isn't collected in one place. There is no First Epistle of Church Organization. However, from this, we shouldn't conclude that God is indifferent to what we do in the church. We should conclude that God doesn't want mentally lazy disciples. The pattern is there, and God wants us to put in the study time and the think time necessary to see it. He wants us to meditate on it.

Second, meditation is important as a tool for comparing our actions to the Scriptural standard. Socrates said that the unexamined life isn't worth living. To that, I will add that the unexamined life isn't going to lead to heaven either. We can't thoughtlessly bull our way through life and hope that things will end well. Instead, we must live mindfully. We must reflect on our actions both before and after we do them, in each case doing our best to honestly determine whether we are carrying out God's will. Without this process of meditation and spiritual calibration, we are doomed.

Finally, meditation is our means of **KNOWING GOD**. Consider the statement of Psalm 145:5. The importance of this cannot be overstated. Christianity isn't about a what. It's about a who. We don't do what we do as disciples because we get a thrill out of following rules. We do it because we want to please God. It is impossible to please Him unless we make our lives about loving Him and keeping His commandments. There's one problem, though. I know my family very well because I see them just about every day. I know each one of you to varying degrees, depending on the amount of time I've spent with you. However, none of us have ever physically interacted with God or Jesus, nor will we

have the opportunity to do so until we get to heaven. How can we come to love someone we can't even see? The answer lies in meditation. God wants us to think about Him and what He has revealed about Himself through His works. As many of you know, Jeff and Paula are going camping in the Rockies later this month. To tell you the truth, brethren, I'm about as envious of them as I can be! I love the mountains, and one of the reasons why I love them is because their majesty proclaims the greater majesty of God. There is much to meditate on in a place like that. However, even those of us who are mountain-deprived can find fodder for meditation in the humbler beauties of nature closer to home. What's more, all of us, wherever we are, can open our Bibles, read about God, and reflect on what we've read. When we spend that time thinking about Him, we will find that love and awe and worship all come quite naturally.

Jesus and Meditation

In the second part of our study this morning, we're going to consider the relationship between the Lord Jesus and meditation. His words should give us all something to think about before we partake of the Lord's Supper. As far as I can tell, the gospels only quote Jesus as using the word "meditate" once, and that use was directed toward the apostles, not us. However, it is equally clear from that record that Jesus valued meditation. During one encounter in particular, His words reveal **OUR NEED** for it. Look with me at Mark 12:24, 26-27. The Sadducees, who didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead, started this encounter by presenting Jesus with a hypothetical question that they thought would show that there could be no such thing as the resurrection. Jesus first demolishes their hypothetical and then exposes the flaws with their overall position. According to Him, they made their mistake because they didn't understand the Scriptures. As evidence, He cites the text from Exodus 3, in which God says to Moses, "I *am* the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob", even though it had been hundreds of years since those men lived and died. Because God is the God of the living, not the dead, those men still had to be alive somewhere, so the souls of men have to be immortal.

Let's be clear here, friends; Jesus here is holding the Sadducees to an exacting level of Scriptural scholarship. He expected them in their reading of the book of Exodus to notice the tense of a single verb and recognize the doctrinal implications of that verb tense, even though the main point of Exodus 3 has nothing to do with the resurrection from the dead. I don't care how smart you are; I don't care how good your reading-comprehension skills are. No mere human is going to notice that verb tense and understand its importance simply by reading the text and thinking no more about it. Only the process of reflection and meditation could possibly have led the Sadducees to grasp that point. And yet, Jesus says that they didn't understand the Scripture and were greatly mistaken. From this, we must conclude that if we want to understand and avoid great mistakes, we must meditate on the subtleties of the word too.

Nearly any passage of Scripture provides wonderful food for thought, but some of the richest texts of all come from the lips of Jesus. First, let's see what He says concerning **OUR TREASURE**. Read with me from Matthew 6:21. It is true that our treasure follows our hearts, and it is also true that our hearts follow our treasure. This is true for us even without extension. The way that we contribute or don't contribute to the Lord's work has a whole lot to say about us. If we are spiritually mature enough to understand that this life doesn't matter very much and the life to come matters a whole lot, we will give substantially enough that it draws our hearts toward heaven. If, on the other hand, we are spiritually immature, still deceived by the lies of worldliness and materialism, we will spend the vast majority of our wealth storing up the things of this life, and the Lord will get pennies on the dollar, if He's lucky. As a result, our hearts will be drawn toward the things of this earth, and we may never find our way to heaven.

This principle, though, has applications far beyond finance. It is generally true that we spend our lives on the things that matter to us, and the things that we spend our lives on matter more and more to us. This could be time. This could be energy. It could be any aspect of our lives. Regardless, where our treasure is, our hearts are there also.

Second, Jesus wants us to meditate on the implications of **HIS LORDSHIP**. Consider Luke 6:46. Jesus is loving, yes. Jesus is gentle, yes. However, Jesus is also Lord, and if we are going to claim Him as our Lord, he expects us to live like it. This means that we give Him complete dominion over everything in our lives. In 2 Corinthians 10, Paul speaks of taking even every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. It's all supposed to belong to Him.

That's how things are supposed to be. How are things really? Let's imagine that we were on one of those reality shows, except that the camera actually was on us 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, both when we're here in the assembly and when we're at home and no one else is around. What would the video reveal? Would the Lordship of Jesus be displayed in all of our actions, or would many of the things we do look like we're obeying the lordship of ourselves? Are we avoiding the things we should, like the expression of lust and greed and anger? Are we doing the things we should, like being kind even to our enemies and telling the lost about Jesus? Or somewhere, are we letting our Lord down?

If we're being honest, all of us will acknowledge that somewhere in that video record, we're doing something we shouldn't. Here, though, is where we take the rhetorical question of Jesus in Luke 6 and make it non-rhetorical. Why DO we call Jesus Lord, but don't do what He says? What is it about that particular commandment that causes us to disobey? We need to think about that and figure it out, because if we don't, we're unlikely ever to change it.

Third, let's meditate about the implications of **OUR DISCIPLESHIP**. Jesus tells us what discipleship requires in Matthew 10:38-39. The standard for our obedience is His walk to Calvary, and that is an intimidating standard! However, intimidating or no, we must acknowledge that it is the standard for all of us.

As most of you are probably aware, many old-line denominations have begun to endorse the practice of homosexual marriage. Underlying this endorsement, I think, is a twisted sense of fairness. These denominations believe that it's too much to ask someone with homosexual inclinations never to indulge those inclinations, to remain celibate his whole life, and so they have invented this idea that the practice of homosexuality sometimes can be pleasing to God.

I acknowledge that there are people out there who are so strongly inclined toward their own sex that the opposite sex has no appeal and never will. I don't know why that inclination exists, but it does. I know it is hard for such people to spend their lives without an outlet. However, simply because the Scripture is demanding does not make it less binding.

Indeed, when we look at the Christian who experiences homosexual temptations, or at the man who has been unscripturally divorced and must spend the rest of his life celibate, and say, "That's too hard," we reveal our lack of comprehension of the demands of discipleship on us. Jesus asks no less from us than He does from the brother or sister who desires to practice homosexuality. Their cross might be more obvious, but ours should be no less heavy. The mainline denominations would have us believe that no one should carry that cross. Jesus' answer is that everyone should. If we don't know what our cross is, the thing that we desperately want to do, that we must not do, we don't understand what it is to follow Jesus. If we refuse to take up that cross, we are no better than the impenitent homosexual or any other willful sinner. Let's reflect, then, on our treasure, His Lordship, and our discipleship as we partake.

How to Meditate

In the final part of our study together, we're going to consider how we can learn to meditate. This is a somewhat difficult subject for me to address, simply because I am meditative by nature. One of Lauren's summer classes concerned meditation and spirituality, and in talking about that class, we discovered that I easily pass into a reflective state that a lot of people, like Lauren herself, have to work to attain. Indeed, my problems lie in the opposite direction. I have no trouble getting so lost in thoughts about spiritual things that I forget to interact with the real world. The other day, for instance, I was driving home from a study when I realized that I was in a different lane than the one I started off in, and I had no idea how I had gotten there. Certainly, I would not recommend meditation to that extent!

Paradoxically, the ease with which I meditate makes it hard for me to explain how. I don't have to think about what I'm doing. I have an easier time describing what I do in the areas where I don't have a natural inclination, because it's there that I have had to think through a more concrete process for myself. Also, even though the gospel is gospel, my applications are not. If something that I say doesn't sound right to you, do something else. Having said all that, here are some things that I do to meditate, that hopefully all of you will also find useful.

First, I try to **FIND SOMEWHERE THAT WORKS**. Look with me at Psalm 63:6. The psalmists spend a lot of time talking about meditating in bed. I don't do that because if I get to thinking about something, I don't ever get to sleep. However, there are other activities that I use as meditation keys: walking by myself, writing, showering, gardening, driving, or even washing dishes will all work. Typically, I look to do something so familiar that I don't have to give my full attention to it, which frees my mind to wander elsewhere. The experience of others may vary. Maybe other Christians can do their meditating in bed without looking over at the clock to find out that it's now 2:30 in the morning. However, every one of us needs to find something in our lives that will help us to engage in contemplation and reflection.

Second, I try to **BEWARE EVIL THOUGHTS**. Let's look at Hebrews 12:15. As I said above, I'm quite meditative by nature. That's neither innately good nor innately bad. It simply is. If I'm not careful, my meditations can take me in an evil direction as easily as in a good one. For example, I have a REAL problem with grudge-holding, because I will replay some action that offended me over and over in my mind, imagine how I would like to express my anger, and generally work myself up into a vicious, bitter state that can last for years. I think it's generally beneficial to let one's mind wander where it will, so if one day, I get really amped up about Mizzou football, for instance, I don't try to muscle my thoughts back where they should be (although if I'm fixated on that for three months straight, I might start to get concerned). However, some meditations are self-destructive and need to be squelched immediately.

Third, I look to **CONSIDER THE WORD**. Once again, this is something the Psalms urge on us, this time in Psalm 1:1-2. Maybe "ruminate on the word" would be an apt image here. All the sermons we hear, all the Bible classes we attend, all the spiritual discussions we have are important, but we can't extract the full measure of spiritual nourishment from those things in that moment. Instead, we have to do what the Sadducees didn't. We have to store those things up in our mind for contemplation later, so that we can grasp their full meaning and search out their implications.

For me, this often takes the form of imaginary conversations with others. The "imaginary" is important because it lets me stop in mid-thought, back up, and re-word the way I want to express a thought (sometimes repeatedly), until my expression captures the essence of that thought. If I did that when I was actually talking to somebody, all my friends would have an even lower opinion of my sanity than they do already! As we've seen already, this kind of meditation is

particularly important in dealing with the words of Jesus, because it is so often the case with them that what He says is not actually what He means, but is instead meant as the starting point for a process of reflection and self-investigation that leads the thinker to His true meaning. Unless we put in this time, we can never learn what we need to be disciples.

Fourth, I like to **CONSIDER THE RIGHTEOUS**. The Hebrews writer encourages us to do this in Hebrews 13:7. Sometimes, the most valuable guides we have to what the Scripture means are the lives of those who live it. Christians need to be students of human nature generally, but we should especially study those who are more spiritually advanced than we are. I know plenty of people like that both in the Joliet church and outside of it, and the way in which they conduct themselves and their underlying attitudes shed plenty of light on my behavior, sometimes light that is unwelcome although needed. For instance, in my life, one of my longest-running friendships is with Glenda Schales. She is an extremely godly and insightful woman, and every time we visit Lauren's folks in Houston, I always make a point to spend an afternoon with her if I can, not least because she will call me on things that nobody else will. Even when I'm not there, I find it useful to ask myself what she would say, and I think I benefit spiritually from that.

Finally, we have to learn to **CONSIDER OURSELVES**. Paul makes this point with respect to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 13:5. Meditation can't be self-absorbed, but it has to be self-reflective. We ought to continually consider not merely the decisions that we have to make, but also the decisions that we have already made. We need to figure out why we do things, and be honest about what those whys say about us. As I implied above, many of my imaginary conversations take the form of me explaining myself to those whose judgment I trust, and I do my best to be honest about whether my self-justifications would fly with them.

I also need to figure out where my self-analysis is not going to be sound. For instance, my self-perception is that I am lazy, when the reality is that "neurotically driven" would be a much more apt description. Like anybody in a profession that allows them a great deal of freedom, I do have to take care that I don't start slacking, but it is also true that the inner voice that constantly demands more will never and can never be satisfied. I need to know when to tune it out, so that I don't get sick or get burned out and generally am able to keep my life in balance.