

Teach Me To Love Thy Sacred Word

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Remember Vince Lombardi? People who do, remember what a fanatic he was on fundamentals. The players he coached at Green Bay often spoke of his intensity and drive. Even more so did they speak about his stress on the basic techniques of the game, on things like blocking and tackling, running and passing. One Sunday his team lost the game to an inferior team. To lose was bad enough, but to lose to that team was utterly inexcusable. So Coach Lombardi called a practice for the very next day. Monday morning the men filed into the team room strangely silent, sat there looking more like whipped puppies than champions, dreading what they knew was going to come from their fearsome coach. Staring holes through one athlete after another and gritting his teeth, Lombardi said, "Okay, we're going back to the basics this morning." And holding a football up high enough for all to see, he stated loudly, "Gentlemen, this is a football."

Talk about basics! But it worked. Lombardi's simple strategy was, "Know your position, learn how to do it right, then do it with all your might." And that simple strategy put Green Bay, Wisconsin, on the pro-football map.

We're here at this conference as teachers and pastors of the Word. Our essay is supposed to say something to us about our own personal devotional use of the Word. Where should we start? How about with the basics? If we are at all serious about the quality of our personal devotional lives, we need to be reminded what the basics are and then we need to pursue them with all our might. Gentlemen, this is a Bible, God's Book, the most important Book in the world, the one without which we say that we cannot live or die, the one we claim we will stand on our heads to teach to our children and preach to our people. Agree? "Yes," each of us would quickly respond. But is that the way it really goes in daily life? Or is the prayer, "*teach me to love thy sacred word,*" one we need regularly in our life? I know I do.

The Danger Is Real

Why do we need a paper on something as basic as our own devotional life? Don't we know how much we need God's Word? Yes, we know, but the danger is very real that we forget. That's one reason why God urges His people to use His Word. "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly," Paul urged in Colossians 3:16. The use of God's Word is to be no "hit or miss" affair, no "now you do it, now you don't" kind of activity. That Word is to "dwell" in Christians. It is to live in them, making its home in them. And this it is to do "richly." The hearts and lives of God's people are to be wide open with room for that blessed Word. How is this to happen except through regular in-depth use of the Word?

What God urges Christians to do, He repeats even more specifically to those He calls into the ministry. Writing to his student and co-worker, Paul stressed the need for Timothy to be "brought up in the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed" (1 Timothy 4:6). Timothy needed to be "brought up," constantly nourished in God's Word if he was going to serve well as a minister. See what Paul was telling him. "To the Word," he was stressing, "keep on being fed by It. Don't ever stop. You need that Word if you are going to serve." In 2 Timothy 2:6 he stresses the same truth, though more graphically. "The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops." First the farmer needs to be nourished

or else he will produce less and less for anyone else. Paul was writing to Timothy who was a pastor and about concerns much deeper than farming. Get the point? And twice, in the qualifications for servants of the Word, Paul used the word translated as “able to teach” (1 Timothy 3:2, 2 Timothy 2:24). More is involved in that concept than teaching skills. Those who teach need first of all to be taught. The more a faithful servant teaches the more he becomes acutely aware of his own need to acquire and apply to himself that which he is to teach. Those are but a few of Paul’s references to servants and their use of the Word. Why did he write this way to Timothy and to us? Could it be that among other reasons, he saw how real the danger would be for us to forget something as basic as the need for our own personal devotional use of the Word?

Just look at how often we have to use that Word in our daily work. Does a day go by when we aren’t forced to reach for it? Classroom devotions and memory passages, sermon studies and sickroom meditations, topics for societies and articles for newsletters, passages to be used in discipling and witnessing, words to be applied to delinquents and the distraught...so the list could go on. And before we know it we can shrink the Word in size to a mere tool. Like the saw in the tool chest of the carpenter, the law books on the shelf of the attorney, the drill in the hand of the dentist, so the Word can become only the professional tool of the teacher and pastor. Hurrying about our duties feverishly, caught up in the flurry of our activities, we may forget something as basic as what it is we hold in our hands and what we need to do with it for ourselves even before we turn to others. In the book *Ambassadors for Christ*, Reverend Paul Lindemann states, “The great peril of the minister is that of deadening familiarity with the sublime. You will not have been long in the ministry before you discover that it is possible to be fussily busy about the Holy Place and yet to lose the wondering sense of the holy Lord. We may have much to do with religion and yet not be religious. We may indicate the way and yet not be found in it. We may be professors, but not pilgrims. Our studies may be workshops instead of upper rooms. Our share in the table provisions may be as servers instead of guests. We may become so absorbed in words that we forget to heed the Word.” We’d like to say that it isn’t so, but the danger that this tremendously packed and powerful Word of our God be viewed as a mere tool for our profession is real.

Another danger may be that we think we know all about the Word. Count them up; how many years have we spent studying it? Let’s see, there were eight years in a Christian Day School (no kindergartens in my day), four years at a synod prep school, four years at a synod college and for some of us four years beyond that in seminary training. Add to that “impressive” total the years we’ve been teaching and preaching (at my stage you don’t even like to add that far any more) and see how learned we may think we’ve become. So let’s spend the preparation time on that math lesson for tomorrow. After all, the new math books are harder and the Bible story for tomorrow I know. I don’t have to spend time on it, reviewing and even learning new about what it offers me and my children. Let’s skip the study of the sermon text. After all, I’ve preached on it four times already. What thing new can it say to me or to my people and besides the Brewers are on tonight. Let’s skip the “Word for Today” column in the *Northwestern Lutheran* and turn to the “Letters to the Editor” section. That’s where the sparks fly and the juice flows. Let’s get through or not even schedule that Scripture study at our conference. There are so many more practical matters to spend our time on. Let’s skip the communion service at conference. I haven’t seen my co-workers for awhile and must get caught up on visiting, or I can use that time for something else. Let’s skip that daily Bible reading. How many times are we to read the Bible through when the *Time* magazine appears more current and the TV shows more

appealing. We'd like to say that it isn't so, but the danger is very real that this Book in which God has so wondrously revealed Himself and into which He has packed the wisdom of our salvation can be viewed as something we know all about.

Besides that, how do I find the time for a personal devotional life? When should I do it? Before or after all those counseling sessions? Before or after all those extra duties? Before or after all those meetings? Before or after all those preparations? Before or after all that correcting? Perhaps I had better ask, "Before or after TV? Before or after my hobbies? Before or after golf or gardening?" "No time" may be a comfortable and convenient excuse, but hardly a valid one. How does that excuse sound to the Lord who said, "These are the Scriptures which testify about Me" and who then urged, "study them diligently?" (John 5:39) We "make" time for regular eating and drinking because we know what happens when we don't. For our personal devotions we need to "make" time also if we realize how important they are. First we decide on the importance of a matter, then we either make time for it or make excuses why we don't. We'd like to say that it isn't so, but the danger is very real that this Book which so richly throughout speaks to us about our Savior and which is God's power to create and continue faith in that Savior can be viewed as something for which we just don't have the time.

Reviewing the dangers we face to our personal devotional life brings a renewed sense of urgency to the prayer, "Teach me to love Thy sacred Word."

The Need Is Real

Reviewing also our need for God's sacred Word will lend urgency to that prayer. What greater need can I have than my own salvation? The great Apostle Paul knew how real this need was for him. "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners," he wrote and then confessed, "of whom I am the worst" (1 Timothy 1:15). Paul was keenly aware of the depths of his sin, and by the Spirit's working, even more so of the greater depths of God's forgiveness in Christ. He marveled that the Son of God could love him and give Himself for him (Galatians 2:20). He prayed that God would help Christians measure "the width and length and height and depth of the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge" (Ephesians 3:18, 19). And he lived in the Scriptures! Dare we do any less? Can anyone of us claim that he is not the worst of sinners? Can any close his eyes to his constant need for assurance of God's forgiveness? The news that "God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them," is not just something the world needs to hear from us (2 Corinthians 5:19). It is something that each one of us desperately and regularly needs to hear for himself.

Not only do we as teachers and pastors sin and have constant need for the message of God's forgiveness, we also have the other needs common to man. We battle temptation and need strength. We panic under sickness and need reassurance. We are numbed by a loved one's loss and need comfort. We worry about wayward children and need hope. We stumble through this vale of tears and need to be led into the same green pastures and beside the same still waters as our people do.

As teachers and pastors we even have increased need for God's sacred Word. Consider some of the temptations and pressures peculiar to our calling. There's that insidious thing called pride which, like some quack root, springs up in a dark corner of our heart and soon stretches far and wide. Pride breeds thoughts like, "Look what I have done with this congregation or classroom. Look at how I have increased church attendance or contributions. Look at the office I hold, or just as bad, look at the office I ought to hold. Look at the call in which I am now serving; how come I'm stuck in such a place; I have better gifts than that!" How we need to go

into that sacred Word to read and reread words like those of John the Baptist in John 3:30, “He must become greater, I must become less.”

Then there’s the opposite—that Creeping Jenny called disappointment. “How come nothing happens when I preach? The gossiping continues and the back-biting never stops. How am I ever going to do anything with that child? No matter what I try things never change. What’s it worth? You can preach and teach year after year and nothing seems to happen and nobody seems to appreciate and some even seem to get a kick out of working against you.” Ever had that feeling? Ever had disappointment wrap it’s fingers around your ministry and slowly squeeze the joy out of it? How we need to go into that sacred Word to read and reread words like those spoken by God to his despondent prophet in that cave, “What are you doing here, Elijah?...Go back the way you came... Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal” (1 Kings 9:15f).

Or what about the thistle plant of resentment which sends its root down deep inside us and causes us to bristle sharply on the outside? Resentment shows in the way we react in thought, if not in deed, toward “Mr. Againer” who always opposes anything proposed at the meeting. It shows in the way we do a slow burn which warms up in intensity as the school year progresses toward “Tommy Taugenichts” and “Susy Sinful” who seem intent on challenging us every hour of every day. It shows in the way we talk about and treat our fellow servants. Perhaps the most difficult people we will encounter in our ministry are ourselves as we struggle to be thoughtful and kind to people who have been neither thoughtful nor kind toward us. How we need to go into that sacred Word to read and reread words like, “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32).

Anyone here want to add to the temptations the “diggers and dungers” in the vineyard face? Anyone want to talk about loneliness or laziness, about the desire to lord it over God’s people or the despondency caused by too many tasks left undone at the end of too many days? About being men pleasers and dollar pursuers? “Check the oil,” my father used to din in my ears when reluctantly allowing me in my earlier years to use his car. He knew how basic oil was to the safe operation of that vehicle. Let the oil run low and the engine itself will be damaged and the work it’s supposed to do impaired. We need it don’t we, that prayer “Teach me to love Thy sacred Word.”

Another need has to weigh heavily upon us. We need to be home in the Word because of the people to whom God has called us to bring that Word. Paul’s words to Timothy ought to ring in the ears of every servant of the Word, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and *who correctly handles the word of truth*” (2 Timothy 2:15). Those who teach and preach are to handle the word of truth correctly. They are to cut straight, not zig and zag, when they present it to others. How can we do this unless we give ourselves to a personal study of the Word? How can we “proclaim the whole will of God” (Acts 20:27) to people unless we know well what that will is? How can we help God’s people reach “unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” so that they will “be no longer infants tossed back and forth by the waves and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming” (Ephesians 4:13, 14) without first immersing ourselves in that Word? How can we offer milk to the weak or meat to the mature, preach Law to the stubborn or Gospel to the shattered, point out error convincingly or present truth clearly, if we are not truly at home in that Word? Our work is to lead people on towards

eternity. Tell me, how can we do this unless it is a country in which we are at home—through the Word?

Martin Luther, we all know, was a very busy man. His production of sermons, Bible studies, books, tracts, and hymns has amazed everyone. “How did he ever do it?” we wonder as we struggle with our own little works each week. Luther once revealed that part of his secret was spending a sufficient time to feed his soul every day by reading and meditating on God’s Word. When Peter the Barber asked the great Reformer for help in developing his devotional life, Luther responded by writing a booklet of some thirty pages for him. In that booklet Luther said in effect, “I take a verse or petition or commandment of Scripture and reflect on it. As I do, I soon find in it instruction for my personal faith and life. This in turn prompts me to thanksgiving. As I reflect further on the verse and find that I have come short of what God requires I am led to penitent confession. This is followed by petition in which I ask God for new strength to believe, to be, and to do what the passage has taught me. As I read God’s Word, I hear the Holy Spirit speaking to me and when He teaches me, I keep silent and become His student. In this manner I find in each verse four ‘intertwined wreaths.’ One I name ‘instruction,’ another ‘thanksgiving,’ a third ‘confession,’ and a fourth ‘petition.’ You, too, will find this to be a simple formula for devotional Bible reading.”

Make no mistake about it. What Luther advocates is not easy. It may be simple, but not easy. This is no “How to Be Devotional in Six Easy Lessons” or “just add water and stir” instant study method. Time and discipline were two essentials in the method Luther used and suggested for our devotional lives. Like Luther, first we need to put aside a specific time each day. For eating and golfing we do this. How about for devotions? Plan a definite time in that daily schedule and let nothing short of an earthquake disrupt the schedule. Devotion time needs to become part of our daily life style. So God urged Joshua. Though Joshua was head over heels with battle campaign plans and all the problems of leadership, though he was busier than he had ever been in his life carrying heavier responsibilities than he had ever imagined even in his wildest dreams, yet he heard the Lord urge him, “Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; *meditate on it day and night*, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful” (1:8)

Secondly, like Luther, we need to study the Bible itself. Read the Book, not just books about it. There’s no substitute for the Word. Back in 1906 Prof. August Pieper wrote, “It is indeed fundamentally perverse when the pastor reads all sorts of merely human books and the Scriptures themselves he neglects. These all should, as Luther says about his own books, only be a crate for the Holy Scriptures. They are only helping tools in order to correctly understand the Scriptures; they are only of worth in so far as we are not yet well versed in the Scriptures themselves through our own understanding. But we ought not remain standing merely in the forecourt, in the side buildings, in the gate of the temple; on the contrary we must enter the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place itself. We teachers of the Word must not always make do with the second hand teaching...There should be nothing, absolutely nothing at all that a pastor of ten or fifteen years does not know in the Scriptures.” What the sainted professor wrote then can hardly be more current!

Thirdly, we need to meditate on what we read. Instead of looking the surface over lightly for nuggets lying here and there, we need intently to mine the depths for the gold contained there. We need to spend the time and discipline required to read and reread, think and rethink, in order to grasp the sense of the sentence or section.

The fourth step is to apply. Instead of just loading up on Bible facts or looking only for applications for our pupils or people, we need to ask the important question, “What does it say to *me*?” Is there a promise for *me* to claim? An example for *me* to follow? A job for *me* to do? A warning for *me* to heed? An attitude for *me* to change?

Like some gardener working plant food down deep to the roots of his favorite rose bush so Luther’s method will work God’s truth down into the roots of the soul. Such a method requires perspiration and persistence, but pays off.

There are various stages to Bible study. Perhaps we could call stage one, the lowest stage, the “medicine stage.” You do it because it’s supposed to be good for you. And then you take it only as long as you think you need it and when there seems to be no other place to turn. Stage two is the “bran cereal” stage. You eat it regularly and it’s good for you, but even with raisins added, it’s still dry. The third stage is the “hot fudge sundae” stage, really enjoyable and a treat to which you look forward. At what stage was Jeremiah when he told the Lord, “When Your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart’s delight” (15:16)? At which stage am I? At my installation I heard words like, “You are to give yourself to the meditation and study of the scriptures...Meditate upon these things, give yourself wholly to them that your profiting may appear to all. Take heed unto yourself and unto the doctrine, continue in them, for in doing this you shall both save yourself and them that hear you.” I wonder why similar, suitable words were not included in the order for the installation of a teacher as we have it in the Lutheran Agenda? They fit anyone who would serve. The words are there in that prayer framed on the sacristy wall at St. John’s and perhaps in yours also, “How gladly do I desire to yield and consecrate my heart and mouth to this ministry. I desire to teach the congregation. *I, too, desire ever to learn and to keep thy word my constant companion and to meditate thereupon earnestly.*”

We need words like these constantly before our eyes. For the more we are reminded of our own very real need for that Word and the very real blessings it brings, the more the prayer will come to our lips, “Teach me to love Thy sacred Word.”

The Benefits Are Real

When we love and live in that Word, the people whom we serve will benefit. An aged preacher gave this advice to young ministers, “The way to prepare a sermon in just five minutes that would take two hours to preach is to study the Bible for at least four to five hours each day for the next 30 years.” We may question the wisdom of two hour sermons, but there can be no question about a bucket which is dipped into the well again and again coming out full to the brim for the people we serve. When we live in the Word, religion classes will be more than “Word o’ God” time which is held each day like all the other classes and which like them receives a grade on the report card. Instead, that hour becomes the highlight of the day and adds the necessary flavoring to the rest of the day. When we live in the Word, there will be devotions which live and personal examples which shine. There’ll be Bible study with interest in the faculty room and in the church meeting room and time found by the servants to attend. There’ll be meat in the sermons and substance in the topics. There’ll be food for the people, the only food which can nourish the soul. We complain about people’s indifference toward God’s Word and neglect of His work. We criticize parents for not maintaining Christian homes and not exhibiting Christian attitudes toward us and their children. Surely reasons abound for such indifference and neglect, but let not us as God’s servants add to those reasons. When God’s servants burn with love in their hearts for Christ and His precious Word, our people will know it. And the benefits will be great.

Calvin Coolidge, when president of our country, said, "People criticize me for harping on the obvious. Yet if all the folk in the United States would do the few simple things they know they ought to do, most of our big problems would take care of themselves." What he said to citizens applies just as well to God's servants and their personal devotional lives. "Back to the basics...know what to do *and do it.*" The Psalmist said it much better, "Happy is the man who...delights in what the Lord teaches and reads it thoughtfully day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water; it produces its fruits in its season and its leaves don't wither. He succeeds in everything he does" (Psalm 1:1-3).

God said it! For us, too!

Discussion Group I

A. Classroom devotions

1. What are some hindrances to *lively* classroom devotions and how would you overcome them?
2. Do you prepare your own?
3. What type of format do you follow?
4. What overall plan do you follow? weekly? monthly? school year?
5. What books do you use as aids?
6. How much application do you make to events which have happened among the children?
7. How do you involve the children in conducting the devotions?

B. Personal use of Scriptures by the children

1. What use of the Bible by students is done in the classroom?
2. How do you encourage children to read Scripture on their own?
3. What methods and helps do you give them for such personal reading?

Discussion Group II

A. Faculty use of the Scriptures

1. How often does your faculty study the Scriptures together?
2. How is such study conducted? when? by whom?
3. What have you used in your study and did it work?
4. What benefits have you received from such study?
5. What would you like to see happen in your faculty's use of the Scripture?

B. Personal use of the Scriptures by the children

1. What use of the Bible by students is done in the classroom?
2. How do you encourage children to read Scripture on their own?
3. What methods and helps do you give them for such personal reading?

Discussion Group III

- A. Hindrances and solutions: Discuss the hindrances you face in your own personal use of the Bible, listing them in priority. Then discuss solutions to these hindrances.
- B. Methods that work:
- How do you go about your personal devotional use of the Scripture?
 - What time of day and frequency do you find most advantageous?
 - How many times have you read the Bible through?
 - What sequence of reading the Bible do you recommend?
 - What aids have helped you?
 - Do you take notes?
 - Which Biblical books appeal to you most?
 - Which Biblical book or section has given you the most help for your personal need?
- C. Help needed: For what kind of help in your personal devotional life do you feel the most need?

Discussion Group IV

A. Which section of Scripture especially brings you:

1. assurance of forgiveness when you sin
2. strength when you are tempted
3. hope when you face sickness or trouble
4. comfort when you lost a loved one

B. Which section of Scripture especially inspires you:

1. to be devoted to your work
2. to fight against laziness
3. to guard against the sin of pride
4. to give God the glory for accomplishments
5. to “blossom where you are planted” and work contentedly for the King
6. to put earthly treasures behind you
7. to respect your co-workers (avoiding gossip, disrespect for those in position of responsibility, appreciating the talents of others, avoiding rivalry)
8. to resist uncharitable questioning of a co-worker’s actions
9. to face impossible situations (students, members, co-workers)
10. to live with disappointment and frustration
11. to face your own inadequacies
12. to give your “best side” *also* to your loved ones