

Week 4: The Disciples' Habits Lifelong Learning

Recap last week.

We talked about the discipline or habit of meditation. Deep thinking on the truths of Scripture. Letting the Bible brew in the brain. John used the illustration that- as tea colors water as it steeps in it over time, when we meditate on it, the Bible colors our thinking. Fills our mind. We saw that we are commanded to meditate, we were created to meditate, and that meditation brings blessing and happiness.

Thomas Brooks, a Puritan preacher in 17th century England, said, "Remember, it is not hasty reading, but serious meditating upon holy and heavenly truths, that makes them prove sweet and profitable to the soul. It is not he that reads most, but he that meditates most, that will prove the choicest, sweetest, wisest, and strongest Christian."

You've likely seen our topic for tonight on being a lifelong learner.

A famous doctor once said, "The more that you read, the more things you will know, the more that you learn, the more places you'll go."

We all have had different experiences as learners- whether formal or informal education. We all likely consider ourselves varying levels of intelligent and have varying levels of interest in "learning".

Learning and wanting to learn is a natural bent for me. I was an over-studier in college; one day during my senior year, my roommate put a sticky note on my desk which quoted part of Ecclesiastes 12:12: Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

When watching a movie or reading a nonfiction or historical fiction book or listening to a podcast, I regularly have my phone nearby to Google things. That's not always good! I want to learn, and God gave you and I minds to learn, but we aren't able-aren't meant to- learn *everything*. So, what's a healthy way to be a lifelong learner?

This is a really sharpening lesson for me.

Tonight, we are discussing how to be a lifelong learner. But why?

The Why of Lifelong Learning

Why is the goal or aim of being a lifelong learner part of the disciples' habits class?

Let's start by looking together at Proverbs chapter 1.

Read 1:1-7.

A mark of a wise person is one who receives and heeds instruction, who increases in learning. Those who despise instruction are fools. And the foundation of this instruction and learning and wisdom is reverence and respect for the Lord.

Being a lifelong learner isn't a spiritual discipline in and of itself. However, it's an integral part to the spiritual disciplines. If we aren't lifelong learners, these habits aren't going to be effective in us. I would actually say that **being a lifelong learner is the natural and expected fruit of a disciple**. It is a characteristic of disciples.

If we're disciples, we ARE lifelong learners. You've likely heard that **disciple means learner or pupil; one who follows someone's teaching**. The root word where we get the word "disciple" from means to learn, to increase knowledge or be increased in knowledge, to hear, be informed.

David Mathis says that teaching and learning are at the heart of our faith. *Our Master, Jesus, is the consummate teacher, and the central task of his under-shepherds (elders) in the local church is teaching. God designed the church to be a community of lifelong learners under the earthly guidance of leaders who are teachers at heart.*

And look at us! We are here, learning together in our local church, under the authority of our elders. I'd say that just the fact that you are here means that you understand at least in some measure that you are to be a lifelong learner. Mathis goes on to say that *"ongoing health in the Christian life is inextricably linked to ongoing learning."*

A theologian commenting on Matthew 5 said, "All his life a Christian should be learning more and more about Jesus. The shut mind is the end of discipleship."

So- **why are we lifelong learners? Because once we become disciples of Jesus that's literally what we become and are professing- We are learners.** Pupils. By God's grace we aren't fools who despise instruction, but we'll be wise men and women who receive and heed instruction, who increase in learning and the fear of the Lord.

The What of Lifelong Learning

If we're going to be learning all of our lives, what should the framework for that be? Is there a focus or main principle to zero in on as we continue to learn and grow? What's the main thing we're learning?

We are all learning all the time- whether intentionally or unintentionally, whether we realize it or not. But as disciples, what are we learning all our lifelong? Primarily- the Word of God. The scriptures. And primarily within them- the person and work of Jesus Christ. **The focal point and center of our lifelong learning is the person and work of Christ.**

At the feet of Jesus
Is the place for me,
There, a humble learner,
Would I choose to be.
-Phillip Bliss (hymn writer)

Gregory the Great said "Scripture is like 'a river broad and deep, shallow enough for a lamb to go wading, but deep enough for an elephant to swim'."

We don't only learn a lot about Jesus and the gospel and our identity as believers when we first become Christians, and then put away our Bibles and just try and take from that initial deposit of knowledge throughout the rest of our lives. We will never plumb the depths of the Bible, however long we may live.

However many years we may walk with the Lord, we are to always be learning and growing, and we are designed to do that within a community of believers. Not neglecting to meet together. This gives us accountability, keeps us in the faith, protects us from error.

Mathis that after becoming Christians, we spend the rest of our days learning, exploring, and going deeper into the person and work of Christ. Learning is not simply regarding facts, information, or knowledge. We learn that but we also learn more.

We don't learn only principles; we learn a person. The center of lifelong learning for the Christian is this: knowing and enjoying God himself in Christ through the gospel word and the written word of the Scriptures- in the hearing and reading and study and meditation and memorization of the Bible.

Jesus is the thing most worthy of our affection and attention. He is the treasure.

And yet, we will also be learning other things all throughout our lives. And so even in that *other* learning, we want it to be through the lens of what we know and believe to be true through God's word. We want to be wise learners.

Tony Reinke says that to read (or learn) anything for eternal benefit, we must behold the glory of Christ. His glory lies at the bottom of all sound knowledge and learning.

So the "What" in lifelong learning is the Word at the center- casting its long shadow on all other learning. It's the lens through which we see everything else.

Now- How might we go about practicing learning for a lifetime?

How to be a Lifelong Learner

Remember like we read from Proverbs 1, we want to be marked by wisdom and not foolishness. Brett McCracken in his helpful book *The Wisdom Pyramid* says,

Everyone has a megaphone, but no one has a filter. We need a better diet of knowledge and better habits of information intake. To become wise in the Information Age, we need to be more discerning about what we consume. Our sources of intake are vitally important. They can make us healthy, or they can make us sick. Bad intake can make us unwise. Good intake- from trustworthy sources of truth- can make us wise.

Wisdom is knowing what to do with the knowledge gained through various means of education: how to apply knowledge and information in everyday life; how to discern if something is true or not; how to live well in light of truth gained. Wisdom is not merely knowing the right answers. It's about living rightly.

Isn't this what we're talking about as lifelong learners? Not only knowing facts about Jesus, about God's word, not just having a storehouse of knowledge, but that knowledge taking root in us and applying it, using it, living in it. Godliness.

As learners we need discernment. Thankfully, the gift of faith in Jesus also brings along with it the gift of discernment. Tony Reinke says that discernment is the ability to do three things: the ability to “test everything” to “hold fast to what is good” and “to abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thess 5:21-22). It is the skill of comparing what we hear or read with God’s Word to determine its authenticity according to God’s revealed truth. Discernment is critical for evaluating everything said *inside* a church building, and it is equally critical for evaluating life experienced *outside* of the church context.

Our foundation as lifelong learners, the main source of our information, should be the Bible. The Bible is also the grid or matrix through which all other information is filtered and tested. The Bible is literally God himself- the standard of truth- truth itself- revealing himself to us.

Jesus said to his disciples, his followers, and learners, that he is “the way, the truth, the life.”

So our main source of learning is the Bible, but, as McCracken says, *The church brings fullness and focus to our understanding and application of God’s truth, in ways that go deeper than what a “just me and Jesus” approach can provide. Church community may be challenging, but it’s the sort of challenging we need in order to grow. The church, the people of God, is second only to the Bible, the word of God, as a source of reliable and transformative wisdom. A faithful, Christ-centered church and its wisdom-infusing patterns of worship is increasingly a refuge for those being pummeled by the maelstrom of our digital era.*

Remember, we’re designed to be learning alongside one another in our local church community.

CS Lewis- The next best things to becoming wise oneself is to live in a circle of those who are.

The “how” of lifelong learning can be tons of ways, diverse and creative, but here are **five principles for lifelong learning that David Mathis gives:**

Vary your sources and seasons

There are a variety of ways we can learn:

(1) **Personal conversations** with experienced, knowledgeable people- especially people who have experienced similar things or are just a little ahead of you

(2) **Books!** They’re accessible anytime and anywhere. You can go at your own pace, you can re-read them.

McCracken- Reading books- and education generally- trains our brains to better handle complex information, to reflect and evaluate rather than just accept. To read well is not to take everything the author says at face value. Rather, it is to understand the author’s argument as best as we can, learn from it, but check it against what else we know. To read and learn well is to develop the ability to encounter a work and file away what’s good and dismiss what’s not.

(3) **Classes**- like this one! Provide the advantage of learning together in community, being able to ask questions, focusing closely on specific material over the course of the class, etc.

(4) **Educational videos**- you can watch at your own pace or a time that works well, see things presented in different ways visually. The Gospel Coalition is full of helpful, free online “courses” which are really educational videos or content over all sorts of topics.

(5) Listening to **recordings like podcasts or audiobooks** .

Remember that depending on the season of life we’re in, those sources will vary and change.

Create space and redeem spare time

No matter what kind of season you’re in- young kids at home, working full time, being a caretaker for a family member, running kids or grandkids around to events and games, you can create little windows for learning. It may be just 5-10 minutes in the morning or before bed or while you eat. You likely have more time for this than you realize- especially if you pause and consider the time you so easily waste.

Depending on which study you read, the average person wastes anywhere from 2-3 hours a day to about 26 days a year! We’ll talk in a few weeks about stewardship, but this is a good time to mention that among other things, like our finances, we are also stewards of time. It has been given to us as a gift. Let’s not squander it.

Mind your mindless moments

We don’t need to be *always* trying to take in information. There is a place for rest and play. But we want to make sure that all of our spare moments aren’t taken up with mindless entertainment. Mathis- lifelong learning, over time, will mean developing the resistance to simply veg out whenever you feel the impulse, and rather to turn some of these moments, if not many, into opportunities to grow. It may not feel like much on any given day, but the payoff over the long haul is enormous.” Philippians 4:8 filter. Connect back to stewardship.

Adapt to new media (but don’t practice chronological snobbery)

You used to be able to tell lifelong learners by the amount of books they had on their shelves, but that’s not the case anymore. Some of the most prolific readers I know, and some of those very dearest to me, are e-reading people. There is a wealth of access to information through e-books, articles, online essays, videos, podcasts, audiobooks. We should take advantage of this never before seen access to information.

BUT, it’s important for contemporary Christians to avoid chronological snobbery, assuming our issues and insights are unique or new. (If you read something that sounds totally new and unique and out of this world- beware!) Those classics that have stood the test of time have done so for a reason. Whether it’s Athanasius’ *On the Incarnation*, Augustine’s *Confessions*, or JI Packer’s *Knowing God*, those books have shown they have quite the shelf life.

McCracken says “the old books, the great books, have lasted because their wisdom is durable in a transitory world.” CS Lewis stated once that a new book “is still on its trial” and must be “tested against the great body of Christian thought down the ages.” He suggests a rule that I’m going to try and follow- read one old book for every three new books.

Far from stale old relics, McCracken says, old books are often the *most* relevant to our present. They have enough distance to speak boldly and clearly to our situation, without the blind spots and inflections of bias that inhibit our judgment.

Books, articles, podcasts, sermons you can listen to online, are valuable sources for gaining information and wisdom, but **they're only helpful insofar as they supplement God's word rather than replace it.**

Embrace the identity of learner

Fellow disciples, we are learners. That is part of our identity. Let's also embrace it as one of our main activities. Learning isn't only something relegated to K-12th grade or higher education. It isn't only for the "elite" or those who are more naturally bent that way- it is for all of us! Wisdom accepts that we can never know everything and that's okay.

How do we embrace that identity? Well, there are **some requirements of being a lifelong learner, or at least some character traits that are common among lifelong learners.**

Humility- If we are not humble- and are instead prideful- we don't think we have anything to learn.

Scripture is full of warnings against being stiff-necked, stubborn, not submissive. "it's impossible for a man to learn what he thinks he already knows." Philosopher

Teachability- Not only taking in information, hearing, but it taking deep root in us and change happening as a result of it. Actually learning from what we're taught. Taking in a lot of information is no good if we don't actually learn from it.

Patience- Phil. 1:6- this work that God started in us will not be completed until the day of Christ Jesus. It will last our lifelong. Patience in this regard can also be a willingness to slow down and process things well rather than simply amassing information and experience as fast as you possibly can.

Hard Work- "Being a student is easy, learning requires actual work" (train yourself for godliness)

*Other *hopefully* helpful thoughts regarding lifelong learning:*

Learning simply for the purpose of amassing knowledge is useless.

"Beware you be not swallowed up in books! An ounce of love is worth a pound of knowledge."

— John Wesley, Letters of John Wesley

We need safeguards!

When we aren't going somewhere, we'll go anywhere- and the "anywheres" of the Internet are rarely good for us.

The digital wanderer is asking for trouble. **Don't go online without a plan.** Go with a purpose, and stay online only as long as you need to.

Cultivating rhythms of healthy information intake; building one's day, week, life around sources most likely to bring truth.

We need to **be careful which voices we listen to, and which sources we use.** You can always find someone who supports what you think- that's part of why we need to vary sources.

We've got to **allow time for processing** or we will not actually take in that information. It will just roll right off of us.

There is a thing as taking in TOO much information. Of making many books....And we need to remember we cannot learn it all. We aren't meant to. We are finite creatures, we aren't all knowing, and we aren't all-seeing.

Remember in your growth as a learner to not leave the Bible behind. Don't think you need to "move on" to commentaries and podcasts and seminary classes or graduate school and forget the foundation.

Spurgeon- At their best, all other books are but as gold leaf, requiring acres to find one ounce of the precious metal. But the Bible is solid gold. It contains blocks of gold, mines, and whole caverns of priceless treasure. In the mental wealth of the wisest men there are no jewels like the truths of revelation.

So, in our day by day, year by year, lifelong learning, let's strive to live as what we already are as disciples- learners. By God's grace, let's be wise people who receive and heed instruction, who increase in learning. Let's not be foolish people who despise instruction, stiffen their necks, think they have nothing left to learn.

Let's together, all our lives, learn more and more about Christ. Let's not shut off our minds and, in so doing, shut off our discipleship. But let's also strive to learn and grow and increase in wisdom and knowledge and as people of the Book knowing that Jesus himself is the greatest treasure- knowing that we are loved by God and can love him no matter how imperfect our knowledge.