

1.24.21 Study: What Are You Putting in Your Head? Philippians 4.8-9

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What comes to mind for you when you hear the word, “study?” Is it a positive or negative word you? Is it a practice you enjoy and look forward to, or does the word conjure up images of having to read or study for a test on a subject you don’t like, don’t understand, don’t think is relevant, or don’t care about? Does the word “study” remind you of a room in your home?

I asked my dad to share his thoughts about study because I know how diligent he was as a pastor to study and read and that he saw his father doing that also. My dad wrote me about what he learned from observing his father and part of what he said was: “My father was up every morning no later than 5 a.m. and into his study. That is what we called his room in the parsonage. The Study. He would close the front and back doors to his study, and no one could enter, not even my mother unless it was an emergency call until 11 a.m. (One coffee break for breakfast with the family.)

His study over-flowed with books which went out of the study, down the hallway and upstairs to his auxiliary study. The parsonage was filled with thousands of books. He was not totally rigid. At 8:00 a.m. during WWII we would listen in the living room to the CBS morning news on the radio. My father would then take me into his study and show me on a map tacked to one of the study doors where the battle was currently taking place. From an early age studying was ingrained in me but I didn’t get it until later in my life.”

One of the first things we all need to understand is that study isn’t just for pastors, professors, teachers, and students. Part of being a mature Christian is **being a life-long learner**; that requires humility because without humility we won’t have a teachable spirit, and it requires a hunger for knowledge and wisdom that recognizes how much we don’t know. Arrogance, pride, and certainty are not likely to lead us to study or learning. **What is study? Study is an “*experience in which through careful attention to reality the mind is enabled to move in a certain direction.*” We practice the discipline of study by reading the Bible, devotional classics, and**

other great works, by observing nature, ourselves, and other people. We engage in study, as we do with all the spiritual disciplines **to create life-giving practices that become lifelong patterns and habits that reflect God's character and the ways of Jesus.** It's great so many of you are participating in a group to help you grow and develop these patterns and habits.

At the beginning of his chapter on The Discipline of Study, Richard Foster writes, *"The purpose of the Spiritual Disciplines is **the total transformation of the person. They aim at replacing old destructive habits of thought with new life-giving habits.** Nowhere is this purpose more clearly seen than in the Discipline of study. The apostle Paul tells us that we are transformed through the renewal of the mind (Romans 12.2). **The mind is renewed by applying it to those things that will transform it.**"*

The apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 4:8-9, *"Finally, beloved, whatever is **true**, whatever is **honorable**, whatever is **just**, whatever is **pure**, whatever is **pleasing**, whatever is **commendable**, if there is any **excellence**, and if there is anything **worthy of praise**, **think about these things**. Keep on doing the things that you have **learned and received and heard and seen** in me, and The God of peace will be with you."*

The Discipline of study is a primary way to *"think about these things."* **We need to be very careful about what we're putting in our head because it shapes our entire life.** The tough thing about study is it requires concentration and focus, and our minds are exposed to so much noise, trivia, gossip, so-called news, entertainment, images, temptation, distraction, violence, and busyness that we're over-stimulated. We're told we live in the "information age," in which we have greater access to more information than any generation that's ever lived. We have high-speed Internet and hundreds of television channels, but all the information we're exposed to hasn't made humanity wiser or nobler. In fact, in some ways we seem to be regressing. It's crucial to our faith, our character, our behavior, and our speech that we spend time studying and thinking - reflecting, analyzing, and pondering deeply on life, the scriptures and on what is right, true, honorable, and just. Sadly, many people are like the saying about computers, *"Garbage in, garbage out."* If you expose your mind for hours a day and dozens of hours a week to the shallow, trivial, and false, it will shape your thinking,

character, and life in that direction. The image of Rodin's famous statue, The Thinker, seated, deep in thought, reflects a desperately needed posture in our time. Yet studying and thinking about the right things has always been a challenge for people.

For example, when I say the word "Christianity," think of the first three words that come to mind for you. What about when I say "faith?" How about "discipleship?" How many of you associated Christianity, faith, or discipleship with the word "study" or "thinking?" I suspect very few of us, even if we thought of more than three words, would come up with "study" or "thinking." Many people don't think of Christian discipleship as involving the mind or intellect or they've been taught that you check your brain at the door of the church and pick it up again when you leave. This is not what God wants from us, nor is it good for us.

Many Bible verses urge us to think and study to better understand God, ourselves, each other and how we're to live. A poster I saw years ago displayed a classic painting of the crucifixion and underneath were the words, "**He died to take away your sins, not your mind.**" Jesus, quoting the scriptures he studied and knew said, "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind;*" (Luke 10:27).

God wants us to study and apply all our mind to learning more about God and how the Lord wants us to live and what God wants us to do. Sometimes people get confused because Jesus tells us we need to have the faith of a little child which they interpret to mean a simplistic, unquestioning faith. Jesus says we need the trust that a child has in a loving parent in recognizing our dependence on God, but Jesus didn't mean we should be childish in our thinking. **Hebrews 5:11-14**, declares, "*We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. 12 In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. **You need milk, not solid food!** 13 Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. 14 **But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.***"

How do we learn to study and think well so we become mature, trained in distinguishing good and evil so we're not easily deceived or led astray? First, **Study the Bible**. Regular reading of the best of scripture will help to convict, challenge, comfort, and call us to Christ-like thinking and living that's why **our tool this week is a User Manual**. The Bible is our User Manual for life. Many scriptures remind us about the importance of what we think about and where we set our mind. **Psalm 26:2** encourages us to engage in intelligent self-reflection, "*Prove me, O Lord, and **try me; test my heart and mind.***" **Proverbs 15:14** reminds us of the importance of continuing to learn. "*The mind of one who has understanding seeks knowledge, but the mouths of fools feed on folly.*" Studying, meditating on, and memorizing scripture is one of most important things we can do to think properly and to have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus.

In Philippians Paul urges us to study and focus our thinking on the true, the honorable, the just, the pure, the lovely, the excellent, the praiseworthy. If you were to keep a chart, what percentage of your thinking is spent on these virtues? Keep in mind this would include all your computer, television, reading, and listening time. How much of what we take in is eternal and how much is shallow? How much is pure and how much is not noble or helpful? How much is true and how much is false or lies? Often, we give more thought to the food we put in our body than the material we put in our minds. You wouldn't put cheap gas in a Ferrari, we should guard our minds even more.

Hebrews 4:12 teaches us, "*The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; **it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.***" In **Matthew 9:4** Jesus asks his opponents, "***Why do you think evil in your hearts?***" In **Luke 9:47** when the disciples were arguing among themselves about who was the greatest, it says, "*But Jesus, **aware of their inner thoughts.***"

I've always found the fact that the Lord knows my inner thoughts disconcerting. Most of us control and manage our behavior more than our speech, and our speech more than our thoughts. In other words, we usually think more than we say and say more than we do. The Lord knows our thoughts are the basis for our actions. You are what you think.

James 2:4 warns us of the danger that we can, “*become judges with evil thoughts*” in how we view and treat other people. What’s truly scary to contemplate is when Paul writes about God’s basis for judgment in **Romans 2:16** he claims there will be “*the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ will judge the secret thoughts of all.*” The idea that God will judge our secret thoughts should be enough to inspire all of us to stop obsessing about what we perceive to be the sin in other people’s lives and to ask God’s mercy and forgiveness for where we fall short and to focus on the cleansing of our own minds and hearts through diligent and systematic study of the good, true, and beautiful.

In Celebration of Discipline Foster names **Four Steps of Study: Repetition, Concentration, Comprehension, and Reflection**. I hope you will talk about those in your small group or with someone else. Briefly, **Repetition** regularly and repeatedly channels the mind in a specific direction. It’s an ancient way of studying because it works. **Concentration** focuses the mind on what’s being studied. Many people have difficulty concentrating all their attention on one thing which leads to them dissipating their energy and not making much progress. **Repetition** and **Concentration** lead to the third step of study, **Comprehension**. Many of us have had the experience of studying something and finally having that “eureka” moment when we “get it” which leads to greater growth, insight, and discernment. The fourth step in study is **Reflection**. **Comprehension** defines what we’re studying, **Reflection** defines **the significance** of what we’re studying.

When we engage in these four steps of Repetition, Concentration, Comprehension, and Reflection, Study helps us Grow Up in Our Thinking. In **1 Corinthians 3:1-2** Paul admonishes the church, “*Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. 2 I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready.*” The Corinthians needed to grow up. Later in **1 Cor. 13:11** Paul wrote about his own experience, “*When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to*

childish ways.” In **1 Corinthians 14:20** he urges us, **“Brothers and sisters, do not be children in your thinking; rather, be infants in evil, but in thinking be adults.”**

If in thinking we’re to be adults, we need to **Study Deeply**. Psalm 92:5 says of God, **“Your thoughts are very deep!”** In 1863, Massachusetts author Henry David Thoreau, wrote about our minds in his excellent essay, *Life Without Principle*. **“There is inspiration, that gossip which comes to the ear of the attentive mind from the courts of heaven. There is the profane and stale revelation of the barroom and the police court. The same ear is fitted to receive both communications. Only the character of the hearer determines to which it shall be open, and to which it shall be closed. I believe that the mind can be permanently profaned by the habit of attending to trivial things, so that all our thoughts shall be tinged with triviality. We should treat our minds, that is ourselves, as innocent and ingenuous children whose guardians we are, and be careful what objects and what subjects we thrust on their attention. Read not the Times. Read the Eternities.”**

We study the Bible and other quality works so we can grow up in our thinking and think deeply about “the Eternities” and significant things that truly matter. Paul writes in **2 Timothy 4:13**, (New King James Version), **“Bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas when you come—and the books, especially the parchments.”** **Even near the end of his life, Paul recognized the importance of reading and study.**

I began by talking about my grandfather and I’ll close sharing with what my dad did with his father’s example. He said, “First, I did not expect God to inspire me at the last moment. It was my duty and responsibility to God, the congregation I served and myself to study. Inspiration comes from perspiration. In my father’s words, *“Sweat it out in the study so parishioners don’t have to sweat it out in the pews.”* Study broadly. A minister should not limit his/her reading to only “religious books.” I did make one major mistake. I only read non-fiction. There was so much to digest in religion, psychology, history, and biography. If I could do it over, I would add some quality non-fiction.” As you can tell, I come from a family that believes in the importance of reading and study. I’ve tried to carry on that tradition and to share it with our sons and with all of you!

What are you studying? Hopefully, many of you can answer, the Bible and Celebration of Discipline!

Let's pray as David did in Psalm 139,

"O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; **you discern my thoughts from far away.**

How weighty to me **are your thoughts, O God!** How vast is the sum of them!

I try to count them - they are more than the sand; I come to the end - I am still with you.

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts.

See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

Psalm 139:1-2, 17-18, 23-24

Blessing: 2 Timothy, 2:7,

"Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in all things."

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What comes to mind for you when you hear the word, "study?" Is it a positive or negative word you? Is it a practice you enjoy and look forward to? Dread? Avoid?
2. Why is it important for Christians to be life-long learners?
3. *"We practice the discipline of study by reading the Bible, devotional classics, and other great works, by observing nature, ourselves, and other people."* How can we benefit from studying and learning from these different subjects?
4. Why do we need to be careful about what we're putting in our head and exposing ourselves to through every form of media that we use including books, social media, online sites, television and radio?
5. Discuss or reflect on these four steps of study: Repetition, Concentration, Comprehension, and Reflection. Which of these four steps is most important in bringing about the goal of the transformation of the individual?
6. How does study help us mature and grow up in our thinking?
7. What step can you take to make study a more regular part of our life?