

Spiritual Disciplines: Study

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Preacher: Kent Dixon

[0 : 00] Good morning and welcome to our online service for Sunday, February 7th, 2021. My name is Kent Dixon. I'm the lead pastor here of Braymar Baptist Church in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

Welcome this morning. Glad to have you here with us, whether you're joining us live in person here on Facebook this morning, or you're tuning in later in the week in whatever way you do that welcome.

It's great to see you here this morning or anytime. So you're always welcome. This is a safe and accepting place where we are growing together in our faith.

We're reaching up to God and we're reaching out to people. That's our mission statement at Braymar Baptist Church, and we welcome you to join us on that mission of God.

I'll also be leading us in communion this morning together a bit later after the sermon. So please gather whatever you have handy, a glass of water, a glass of juice, a cracker, a small piece of bread, and have that handy.

[1 : 01] And I'll remind you about that a little bit later. Let's open in prayer this morning. God of secret things, you are Lord not only of the surface, but of the heart.

You know us in our deepest being. You call us to righteousness in every part. You exhort us not simply to actions, but to love.

Not simply to perseverance, but to hope. Not simply to duty, but to joy. Father, we give you thanks that you've worked salvation in our inmost beings.

We have been born again. We have the opportunity to be born again by your spirit. You've taken out our hearts of stone and given us hearts of flesh.

You've breathed into us the breath of life by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Teach us, Lord, to follow you not simply in word, but in truth.

[2 : 03] Conform our affections and our passions to your design. Transform our minds. Create in us a clean heart, O God, and renew our spirits in steadfastness.

Give us holiness in our inward places that from the outflow of that change, our mouths would speak and our wills would move.

Unite our hearts with yours so that we may be more like you. Lord, you tell us that you delight in obedience.

I pray that you would give us that same delight. You tell us that you have a compassion for the least and the lowliest. Give us hearts that break for them.

You tell us that the spirit you desire is one of humility, gentleness, and patience. Lord, give us such virtues as fruit of the spirit's work within us.

[3 : 09] Grant us confidence that comes from realizing that you are the God who reigns over the inward person. Calm our anxieties about the world by reminding us that the hearts of kings are streams in your hand.

Lord, make us bold in proclaiming the gospel, the good news, by reminding us that you are the one who calls and brings repentance.

Lord, let us have a posture of courageous victory as we confront the flesh and the devil. Not because we are mighty in ourselves, Lord, but because you have begun a good work in us and you have promised to carry it out to completion.

Lord, as we come to you in prayer, hear the longings of our hearts for those close to us. Be near to those who mourn.

Heal those who are hurting. Lord, restore in relationship those who have wandered. Lord, as you have saved us, we ask you to work salvation in the people that we know who do not know you.

[4 : 24] We pray this with all our hearts. Lord, we ask all of these things in the name of your son, Jesus Christ, who has won our hearts by his cross and intercedes with you now on our behalf before your throne.

Amen. Well, this morning we have an action-packed, well, we have a packed service in terms of communion and sermon as we continue in our series and so on.

So this morning, sorry to break it to you, but we're going to sing two songs together this morning. So just to give us a little bit of time, because I know that people will be getting hungry as they're watching this service.

So God bless you as you sing. We're going to sing the two songs. One is Here is Love. And the other one is a well-known old hymn, All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name.

So bless you as you sing these songs. The lyrics will appear on the screen and the worship leader will lead us. Bless you as you worship God with your voice.

[5 : 36] Go and do that now. Here is love, our stars, the ocean, loving kindness as the flood.

In the prince of life, our ransom shed for us, His precious blood. Who is love will now remember? Who can cease to sing His grace? He will never be forgotten throughout heaven's eternal days.

On the mount of crucifixion, found open deep and wide.

Through the floodgates of God's mercy. Through the floodgates of God's mercy. Floating past in gracious time.

[6 : 57] Grace and love like mighty rivers. Horde incessant from above. Heaven's peace and perfect justice.

Kiss to give you a love. Love, O Lord. Love, O Lord. Love, O Lord.

Love, O Lord. Let me, O, Thy love accepting. Love me ever all my days.

Let me seek Thy kingdom only. Am I life to be Thy grace? Thou alone shall leave my glory.

Nothing in this world I see. Thou hast cleansed and sanctified me. Death by me.

[8 : 00] Thou thyself. Thou set me free. Thou hastisson, O Lord. Absolutely not given any time.

Thou hast■■ the name of the Messiah. Universal by teal. In heaven's love grows trip just serve to life. Hail the power of Jesus' name.

Let angels prostrate fall. Bring forth the royal dire town and crown him Lord of all.

Bring forth the royal dire town and crown him Lord of all.

Sinners whose love can now forget the wormwood and the gall.

[9 : 23] Go spread your trophies as me and crown him Lord of all.

Go spread your trophies at his feet and crown him Lord of all.

Go spread your trophies to the arm of the sea and crown him Lord of all.

Well, if you're ever wondering what I'm doing as I lean off the screen. lean off the screen, I'm unmuting my microphone. I've watched these videos and thought to myself, hmm, I wonder if anyone's wondering or if anyone cares what I'm doing when I look off the screen.

Well, I'm just unmuting my microphone so that you don't have to listen to me shuffling papers or talking to myself as you're listening to the worship songs. So there's a little behind the scenes information. Well, this morning we're continuing in our sermon series titled Spiritual Disciplines Exercise Your Faith. And we've been recognizing through our series that as followers of Jesus Christ, as his disciples, we can benefit from some tools and skills that will help us on our journey. And these tools and skills are known as spiritual disciplines.

[10 : 57] Well, Christian spiritual disciplines, as we've recognized week by week, have existed since the very earliest days of the church. These are still important and they are still valid.

And these tools and skills are intended to help us put ourselves before God. Help us put ourselves in a state of mind and a state of heart where we can best interact with him. And this morning we're wrapping up our exploration of the inward spiritual disciplines. You may remember at the beginning of this series, I said that we're looking at three groups. There are inward spiritual disciplines, outward spiritual disciplines, and corporate ones. And we're going to look at all of those together through our series. Well, this morning we're finishing, as I said, the inward spiritual disciplines. And these are, as I've said before, the most personal, the most directly between ourselves and God. So far we've looked at meditation in this series. We've looked at prayer. We've looked at fasting in this first section. And we're going to close this section today as we consider the discipline of study. Well, the word study. It's one of those words that can tend to, I believe, strike fear into the of teachers and professors who often have to beg their students to do it. Please study for this exam.

Please study for this quiz. Please study the material that we're covering in class. It's important that you learn this stuff. And no matter the age of the student, the concept of studying generally relates directly to what? Tests. So perhaps you're a student now. Many people who attend our church or connect with us online are students. Perhaps you're a student and you can relate to the anxiety and worry that tests can bring. There probably aren't many of us who can't recall one or more times over the course of our lives when we've experienced some or maybe even a lot of anxiety or even fear as we've looked at our calendar and saw a looming exam or test date on the horizon. For university and college students, often they will sit down at the very first class of the year and look at what's known as a syllabus.

And the syllabus outlines the entire coursework for the semester. The syllabus will include lots of things and students usually key in on test dates, dates papers are due, and things like that.

Assignments.

[13 : 53] Because as students, we, I was a student in seminary not all that long ago, we need to organize our calendars with multiple classes and multiple requirements. We need to juggle it all and keep it all on our radar. You know, I distinctly remember being woefully unprepared for one exam in high school.

I was not what you would call a great student. I recovered well in university. I've taken a few different university courses and diploma and degree and so on. And where I resonated with my education was in areas that were where I, how God had wired me. So language and communication and now theology and things like that. But in high school, I was not a great student all the time. There were areas, English, obviously, social studies and so on. But I sat down at an exam. I looked at the paper.

I looked through the paper at all the questions. And then I took a long walk of shame back to my teacher's desk. I don't know the answers, I said. My teacher and I were quite friendly. We got along well. We understood each other. And he looked at me sympathetically and said, well, why don't you at least try? Maybe you know more than you think. And I felt honestly pretty embarrassed and silly, but I responded, I don't know this. I would just be wasting your time. I left that classroom knowing that a zero on that test would really affect my mark. But there was also no way I would have passed.

I just didn't know it. And it's worth mentioning that it was a math class. And I have never been gifted at math. I have a friend who is a math professor. And he said to me at one point, you have a logical mind. He said, at some point in your educational experience, someone missed a step that you needed to know. And that cascaded. He said, you have a mathematical brain in so many ways. And you would excel at math if someone had taught you it properly. Well, we'll never know unless I decide to try and take it at some point. But that experience still stands out in my mind as one where studying or some other form of help would have likely made a difference. According to the American Test Anxieties Association, there you go, just trying to remember the name of that organization to make you anxious, the American Test Anxieties Association, they say that it seems children generally develop test anxiety or worry about tests between grades two and four. And that usually continues throughout the rest of their educational career, even into high school, junior high, high school, university and beyond as adults.

Fear of failure, expectations, high standards. What creates this anxiety? It's those things. A lack of preparation, perhaps procrastination, or perhaps even poor measurement tools, such as grading or the tests themselves. And at the root of test anxiety, studying.

[17 : 32] Did I study enough? We ask ourselves, students ask themselves, did I study the right things? You often hear students say, and professors and teachers joke about it a lot because it happens all the time. A student will be in a class listening to material or ultimately not listening and say, I have a question, will this be on the test? So in other words, I want to know ahead of time so that I can either prepare or ignore the stuff that's not important for me to need to regurgitate on an exam.

And as we considered, so when we come to the spiritual discipline of study, we need to recognize that we come to it with some baggage, some anxieties that maybe we don't even realize we have. And as we did when we considered the discipline of meditation, I believe it's helpful to seek to redeem or reclaim the idea of study, particularly in a Christian perspective. And we can also begin to look at the idea of study and how it can fit into, how it can enrich our Christian journey.

Ultimately, folks, study is not solely about cramming as much information into your head about a specific topic as you can. That's the model of studying for an exam. We cram information in to try and pass a test so that when we're quizzed about the information, when we're tested on it, indeed, when we're put on the spot about our knowledge of or lack of knowledge of a topic, you can somehow pass a real or imagined test.

Have you ever been in a conversation with someone and a topic comes up and the other person is very knowledgeable on the topic and you want to engage in the conversation and yet you feel inadequate somehow because your knowledge of, your study of that topic is somehow not the same, is not at the same level.

And that's okay. But it challenges us to learn, to keep learning. If you think about it for a moment, does the idea of study, does that evoke those kinds of worries for you? The idea of needing to pass a test to pass a standard of some kind? Sure, there will also be one view of it that looks at it that way.

[20 : 10] At least as long as education systems continue to be based on tools, tests, designed to measure knowledge, right? It's a very traditional, it's a very old format of education, of teaching.

But study is ultimately about so much more than that and certainly from a Christian perspective. There's no question that by exposing ourselves to something regularly, by focusing on it, immersing ourselves in it, we are studying it in one way or another.

Whether we recognize it or not. Does that make sense? If you immerse yourself in something, you are becoming a student of it, whether intentionally or it is teaching you, it is shaping you in an unintentional way. And that cannot always be a good thing.

Whatever we focus our attention on, our time on, our intellect on, is shaping us. That's reality. Whether we realize that or not.

Perhaps you've heard the expression garbage in, garbage out. Have you heard that expression before? Well, it originated in the mid-20th century and actually came from the world of computer programming.

[21 : 30] It recognizes that the quality of input that we receive directly relates to the output we produce. Does that make sense? In other words, whatever input or influences we expose ourselves to, we study in our lives, will directly affect our behavior, our words, and ultimately the orientation of our hearts.

And that is what lies beneath the idea of study as a Christian spiritual discipline. So we're going to look at four different little aspects. So if you're a counter, you can begin counting.

First, let's begin in an obvious place with Scripture as a subject of study. In the Old Testament, as we read in Deuteronomy 11 verse 18, We can relate to the meaning that this means that is essentially referring to the first five books of the Bible.

You may know them as the Pentateuch, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.

That's what God is referring to, specifically of fixing these words in your hearts and minds.

But for those of us who have received the full revelation of God, all of the books of the Bible, 66 of them in fact, can be seen as the Word of God.

[23 : 17] So God is challenging us, encouraging us to fix all of the canon of Scripture in our hearts and in our minds. In Philippians 4 verses 8 and 9, Paul reminds us, Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about, and here, study, here, such things.

Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me or seen in me, put into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

As you may remember from our exploration of the disciplines of meditation and fasting, we recognize that the input and influences we choose, the things we focus our time and attention on, they are critical as we seek to draw closer to God.

In John chapter 8 verses 32 and 33, Jesus said, If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.

Then you will know the truth by holding to Jesus' teaching. We will know the truth, he says, and the truth will set you free.

[24 : 48] Jesus reminds us here that in studying the Bible, we will be reminded of, we will see God's overall plan. We will then see the gospel.

We'll see that truth beyond anything else we can study. That truth has the power to set us free. Studying scripture isn't about preparing to pass some kind of test, or appear more knowledgeable than someone else.

It's not a competition. Studying scripture is about exposing ourselves to, immersing ourselves in, the study of what is most healthy and helpful for us.

God's word. God's truth. Does the idea of studying scripture seem daunting or even boring to you? Well, as I've said before, the spiritual disciplines are largely about perspective. And it's no different for the discipline of study. If we approach it with an open mind and a sincere desire to connect with God, no matter what we're studying, we have an amazing opportunity to both connect with him and to learn.

[26 : 10] So while daily devotions or Bible study groups, depending on the leader and the material you're covering and so on, these are important ways to grow in our faith, and commitment to those things are important.

But quite often those opportunities, daily devotions or a weekly Bible study group, are not necessarily the kind of depth of studying scripture that is available to you.

One approach to studying scripture, for example, is to take a longer book like Genesis or Jeremiah. And at our church right now, Vern is leading a group in studying the book of Jeremiah in detail, chapter by chapter.

So take a longer book like Genesis or Jeremiah and read through it. Read through it from beginning to end. Make notes as you read.

Write down questions, things that don't make sense. Write down, take note of points of interest, things that you didn't know before or didn't recognize before. Perhaps you know the book.

[27 : 17] Read it again and try with fresh eyes. Look for new concepts, new ideas that you may not have noticed. The goal is not here, in this case, to speed read through and simply say, yep, Jeremiah, read the book, beginning to end, did it in a week, did it in an hour and a half, whatever it is for you that's some sort of standard of achievement.

It's not simply to say you got it done. Dig in and read for understanding. Study Bibles are great for this.

Because if you note in a study Bible, quite often almost every verse or a passage will have footnote at the bottom that gives you context, that may even give you a devotional perspective on what you've just read.

And those are so helpful. They provide background and insight. There are lots of commentaries, lots and lots and lots of commentaries, available on every possible book, all 66 of them, folks.

You can find a good commentary and read a commentary as well as reading the book itself. So you can get some real depth there, some real meat in what you're reading.

[28 : 35] Well, if that seems daunting, if that seems kind of heavy for you, take a shorter book like Ephesians or 1 John. They are short, but they are deeply rich.

Read through them every day for a month. Again, this is not about checking off your calendar. Did today, did today, did today. But do that. Read through it multiple times.

Aim for once a day. Read through the entire book for a month. Over time, the patterns in the books will become more clear. The themes will begin to emerge to you.

They'll become more familiar. So keep notes of the new things that you come across each time you read. Because scripture reveals new truth to us every time we open it and read it.

So as I said, there are excellent study guides that you can find for books of the Bible that can support you along the way. The same is true of reading a shorter book for longer periods of time.

[29 : 41] Now remember, I said we'd look at four things. Here's number two. We need to recognize that Christian study is not solely limited to the Bible.

Does that make you scratch your head for a moment and say, where is he going with this? Well, there have been many amazing works of Christian literature that have been written over the years. Christian fiction, Christian non-fiction that have been written by deeply, deep Christian thinkers, theologians, Bible students, people who have spent many, many years focusing on different topics. Christian authors have written about their personal journeys and their experiences in the Christian life and we can learn from them. And there's so much that we can learn from the insights of other people.

I've said this before, the Christian journey is not a solo journey. The highs and lows that others have experienced and the knowledge they've gained along the way, the insights they've gained along the way, we can learn from that as well.

[30 : 50] Any topic you can conceive of within the Christian life, within the Christian journey, has been explored by great Christian writers over the years.

Prayer, worship, studying scripture, service, missions, sharing our faith, so many things.

All of the topics you can imagine have been addressed by someone who put deep thought, deep godly thought, into them. There really is a wealth of resources for you to learn from, to steep yourself in, that will enrich your life and help you draw closer to God and understand Him better. Well, I recognize that for some of you, you may be listening to me and be stuck at the idea that for most of what I've said so far, it involves reading.

I love to read. I come from a long line of readers. I married someone who loves to read. So, but I recognize for some of you that we live in a world of TV.

[32 : 02] We live in a world of the internet. And those tools, those pieces of technology have in many ways become our storytellers. We can passively consume whatever we want content and easily become exposed to and immersed in content that is ultimately little more than junk food for our minds and hearts.

Now, hear me. I love TV. I love access to the internet and the many tools that offers. I love movies. But at the same time, I can recognize there's a dark side to everything.

And so we need to be discerning as we make choices. Garbage in, garbage out. If you're not a reader and that idea is more of a stumbling block to you than a starting point, great news, there are audiobook versions of every translation of the Bible, as far as I know, most of them.

And likely, most, if not all, great Christian writing, all of the great works of Christian authorship that you can read, there are audiobooks available of those as well.

We live in a great time for that. So you can listen to scripture. You can listen to a book while you're out for a walk. I used to do that every day when I worked downtown in Edmonton.

[33 : 30] I would go out for my lunch walk and I would listen to scripture as I went for my walk. And I would just steep myself in scripture as I was getting some fresh air and it was a great combination for me.

And it was a good use of that time, I found. Listen while you do housework. Listen while you do other projects. Listen in your car. Lots of people I know listen to podcasts, Christian podcasts or scripture or other things while they're on the road.

if they have a long drive. So just remember that if you're looking to multitask, make sure that your study is not taking a back seat, pun intended I guess if you're driving, to other things in your life. So if you're intending to focus on studying, make that your priority for a given period of time. Third, did you know that spiritual study is not just about books, not just about reading.

When we spend time in nature, reflecting on what God has created and the beauty of the natural world, folks, that is study too. We're allowing God to speak to us in different ways than just the written or spoken word.

[34 : 50] As Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky said, Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it.

Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you'll perceive the divine mystery in things.

Once you perceive it, you'll begin to comprehend it better every day. I've shared with you before that I love being in nature and God speaks to me there in deep and meaningful ways.

Nature can speak to you. You can be a student of nature and God's creation. Fourth, I also encourage you to study, wait for it, yourself.

Yes, you heard that correctly. Ask God to help you understand your motivations, your moods, your actions, your words.

[35 : 56] Help God to shine a light in you so that you can see what he's trying to teach you, what he's trying to change in you, the areas where he wants you to grow. Seek to understand how you can be personally renewed in your mind and your actions.

Ask God to help you to let go of pride when you find it. insecurity, other things that may be holding you back from growing closer to him.

My friends, the spiritual practice of study is really about retraining our minds. It's about training them to focus with intentionality on the things, the kind of content and messages that are best for us, that God has for us.

This morning, as we celebrate communion together, this is a study of another kind. We're intentionally focusing on the truth and power of the sacrifice of Jesus, the price that we could never pay, the price that was paid so that we can receive God's grace, God's mercy, and so that we can be forgiven and restored in relationship with our merciful and gracious God.

When we remember the sacrifice of Jesus as we will now, broken, damaged, and dismembered aspects of our past lives are put together again.

[37 : 38] Mind, body, and soul in the present tense can enjoy wholeness, helplessness, and helplessness in the face of an unknown future gives way to resurrection hope.

As we prepare to celebrate communion together this morning, I'm going to begin with these words of approach. We gather at this table to celebrate life, the life of God in the world, made flesh and blood in Jesus embodied in us.

We come to remember the body that was broken, the hands that touched the untouchable, healed the hurting, and did no violence, the feet that got dusty along city streets and at the lake shore, the arms that welcomed the stranger and embraced the outcast, the legs that entered homes and synagogues and danced at celebrations, the eyes that blazed at injustice, knew how to cry and saw the potential in everyone, the belly that shared table with unexpected people and shook with laughter, the lips that wove stories and painted pictures of a new community and a better world, this blessed body was broken, abused, and rejected.

We come to remember for we are called to be the body of Christ. As you, risen Christ, remember our lives, so we remember you.

And not only at this table, but in our lives together, may we embody your kingdom and remember your life in the world.

[39 : 41] And now I'll share some words of thanksgiving. Let's pray. Oh God, we give thanks for this bread and cup, a timeless reminder of the flesh and blood life of Jesus, broken, rejected, yet unstoppable.

in Christ, we see a life that could not be ended by death, a purpose that could not be silenced by the forces of violence, a desire deep within you for the transformation of the world.

Lord, as we eat the bread and drink the cup, we thank you for the acceptance and tenderness with which you have transformed our shame into dignity and loved us into life.

We thank you for cherishing the potential in us and for calling us to be partners in your vision for this world. As we eat the bread and drink the cup, Lord, we call on your spirit to come alongside us so that together in the company of your spirit we may give ourselves afresh to the task of remembering you, of being the body of Christ, of living your life in this world.

Amen. Now, as I said at the beginning, if you could take a moment to gather your bread or crackers and just hold on to that as I share a moment.

[41 : 26] this broken bread we share is the body of Christ. It's a sign that of all that we live and risk together as the community of Christ, let all who seek Christ take and eat.

Now, if you could please gather your juice or water. This cup we drink together is the wine of the kingdom of God, the sign of God's undertaking for the life of the world.

Let all who seek Christ take and drink. Let's pray. We have taken the bread and cup into our bodies. Now, may these hands be the hands of Christ in the world. May they do no violence. May these eyes see those who are overlooked.

May these ears listen to those who are unheard. May these voices be raised for the voiceless, lest our songs of praise be empty.

[42 : 39] May these feet take us where Christ leads, and may these hearts and minds be open to your spirit. Christ has remembered us.

May we remember Christ. Amen. On Communion Sundays at our church, when we celebrate communion together, we receive a benevolent offering during that that is used to help folks in our community who are in need, folks who are in our church, who are facing financial challenges, and so on.

And the reality of that, as I've said before, is different in the time of physical distancing, obviously. So I encourage you to please continue to send offerings to the church, benevolent offerings, and

your regular giving to the church.

I also encourage you to look for opportunities to show kindness and mercy to the people that you meet during this challenging time. Let's pray for the giving that is to come.

Lord, I pray for any benevolent offering that's being sent as people consider ways to serve, ways to recognize the needs of others in their community.

[43 : 58] Lord, as we've prayed already, may we be your hands and feet in our communities. May we care for one another as you have called us to. Lord, we can be an intentional source of support and encouragement to one another during this time.

Lord, thank you for your safety and your protection for each of us. Lord, I pray for those who are struggling with health concerns of various kinds. Lord, we ask for healing and comfort.

Lord, thank you that you continue to provide, that you continue to bless us and shine your face upon us. If we're just able to open our eyes and see you're all around, thank you that you're with us and that you will sustain us.

We pray these things in your name. Amen. My friends, may the beauty of God be reflected in your eyes. May the love of God be reflected in your hands.

The wisdom of God reflected in your words and the knowledge of God flow from your heart. That all might see and in seeing, believe.

[45 : 17] My friends, go in the love and peace of Jesus Christ. Be blessed as students of God. Amen.