

Meditating on God's Word in a Culture of Shallow Scrolling

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's scripture reading is from Psalm 119, 97-105, and 2 Timothy 3, verses 16 and 17.

A reading from the Psalms. Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day. Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me.

I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts.

I hold back my feet from every evil way in order to keep your word. I do not turn aside from your rules, for you have taught me.

[1 : 22] How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth. Through your precepts I get understanding, therefore I hate every false way.

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. The grass withers and the flowers fall. The glory of God stands forever.

A reading from the second letter of Timothy. All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

This is the word of the Lord. Thank you, Melissa, for that scripture reading. Good morning. My name is Andrew. I'm one of the pastors here and delighted to open up God's word with you this morning.

But before we do that, let's go to him in prayer. Father, would you give us a holy anticipation for how you would speak to us through your word, your divinely inspired word that is profitable for all things.

[2 : 41] Give us ears to hear, we pray. Give us a hunger for your word that we might taste the sweetness of it. Sweeter than honey and more precious than gold.

We want to hear from your word. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Alright, so earlier this week, I got to listen to a podcast that I saved all the way back in May. It's from the Ezra Klein show with the New York Times Opinion.

And what caught my attention about this podcast episode was its title, Your Mind is Being Fracked. Alright? Your Mind is Being Fracked. And you know, I didn't exactly know what fracking was or at least how it worked.

But at the same time, I was pretty sure that that statement was true of me and my mind. That my mind was being fracked. And so on this episode, Ezra has this historian of science come on.

His name is D. Graham Burnett. And he's working on this book on attention. And he's out at Princeton University. They're having this conversation about attention and about how we started to pay attention to attention.

[3 : 44] And how especially now, attention has become super valuable in this thing we call the attention economy. Where our attention is being fracked. Like, it's unnaturally, unhealthily, you know, being harvested and then monetized for, like, tons of money.

According to one data expert that I read this week, our attention every day is worth over \$800, right? In fact, there's a financial planner named Carl Richards.

He wrote for the New York Times. And he would suggest that our attention is our most valuable asset. Because unlike money, it's more like time, right? You can't store it. You either use it or you lose it.

But it's even more complex and valuable than time. Because you can spend time on something or with someone. But not necessarily pay attention to them. And give them your valuable attention and time.

So Richards, he says that attention may very well be a human being's most valuable asset. Because in many ways, it's the most in-demand and uniquely personal asset that we have to offer.

[4 : 49] To give someone our attention is to give them our very selves in a very real sense. And this is precisely why our minds, our attention is being fracked, right?

It's super valuable. And I don't know exactly how that works in your life. But totally, my mind gets fracked all the time. My attention. And this is how it happens. Even for me, a pastor, a preacher.

This is how it goes on a normal week. But specifically when I'm writing these sermons, all right? So I'll be writing one of these sermons. And then I'll be tired. I'll get stuck. Or, you know, I just kind of need a little dopamine hit.

A little escape. So I, you know, in my weariness, I take a break from the deep work, right? And I'll very often turn my attention to YouTube or Instagram or Facebook.

See if there's anything new or interesting to entertain me. Give me something mindless that I can just kind of consume. But I think we've all been there, right? What happens? Doom scrolling, right?

[5 : 47] Rabbit trails into endless content punctuated by these annoying five-second ads and sponsored posts, right? For me, I can go from a Steph Curry video to funny scenes from The Office to a comedian clip to a food vlogger.

And actually, one thing that's super unique to my algorithm is I like to watch chiropractic videos where they crack people's backs really loud.

And then, like, they go home healed. Apparently, there's a name for people like me. I'm a crack addict, apparently. But all this is to say, you know, Instagram and YouTube managed to capture my attention for way longer than I care to admit.

So, oftentimes, I'm like, oh, shoot, where did that 25, 45 minutes just go? It's like, oh, man, my mind got fracked again. YouTube paid a content creator, you know, X amount of dollars to capture my attention.

And I unwittingly paid for that content with my attention. But the thing is, was it an exchange that benefited me nearly as much as, you know, the CEO of YouTube?

[6 : 57] Did it make me a richer person, a healthier person, a wiser person, a more deeply rooted person, the person that God made me to be? Probably not.

Usually, usually not. Unless I'm, like, re-watching one of Jonathan's sermons. Then it's, like, all good, right? In truth, in this attention economy, we're often swindled.

We're literally paying our attention to someone or something else for things of lesser value than what our attention is truly worth. So, the question I want us to consider this morning is, what is our attention worth?

And not just what's it worth to Meta or, you know, some other big tech company, but what's it worth to you? And even more importantly, what's our attention worth to God?

I want us to pay attention to our attention today, all right? Now, if you're new today, you know that we've been going through this series in the Psalms on the holy habits, these holy habits of grace, the spiritual disciplines that Christians have been practicing for thousands of years to help them commune with God and be formed into the deeply rooted, flourishing people that God intended them to be.

[8 : 06] And the particular holy habit that we're going to be talking about today is the spiritual discipline of meditation. Meditation. Now, in case you missed the very first sermon in this series, Jonathan opened this series up from Psalm chapter 1.

And by the way, our kids and our youth are going to be memorizing Psalm chapter 1, so we would ask that everyone participate in that. Let's memorize Psalm 1 together. Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers, but his delight is in the law of the Lord.

And then what does it say? That he makes a lot of interesting observations, that he tries to memorize it, that he tries to read it every day. No, on this law, it says he meditates day and night.

See, what the Psalms teach is that foundational to a blessed life, foundational to a rooted life, foundational to a flourishing life full of transcendent wisdom and vibrant fruitfulness.

If you want to be like a tree planted by streams of water yielding fruit in season with leaves that do not wither, it's not enough to just not walk in the counsel of the wicked, to not stand in the way of sinners, to not sit in the seat of mockers.

[9 : 16] It's not even enough to just read your Bible or study your Bible or memorize your Bible every day. No, we will not become large, flourishing evergreens unless we meditate on the words of God.

Unless we meditate on the words of God. But now, what does that even mean? To meditate on the law of the Lord. Well, if I could put it simply and put two words into your heads to help you understand what meditation is, I'd say that meditation is about attention and maintenance.

Those are the two words I want in your head. Attention and maintenance. So let's start with attention. Now, I want to briefly distinguish between Christian meditation and what many of us understand as transcendental meditation or mindfulness practices.

And if you want a more complete discussion of that, I would highly recommend this article in the Journal of Biblical Counseling called, or by Joanna Jackson. Highly recommend it. I could send that to you if you're interested in that.

But let me just start by saying, I'm not here to bash on the yogis out there, or to bash on you mindfulness enthusiasts. It is entirely fine and even appropriate to, you know, in our fast-paced society, take a moment to stop and breathe and slow yourself down, take some time to collect your wits and to be present to the moment.

[10 : 39] But what sets the Christian discipline of meditation apart from other forms of mindfulness and meditation, what sets it apart from New Age spirituality and Buddhism and medieval mysticism, is that in Christian meditation, our aim is not simply to empty our minds and consciousness, but to fill them with the words and works of God.

Christian meditation is full of content. It's meant to be an encounter with a person, with God, and with His promises, and with what He's revealed to us.

Contrary to many Eastern versions of meditation, words aren't the problem, an active mind isn't the problem, our attention isn't meant to be turned completely inward, toward our deepest, innermost, individualistic self and body, or to some void called the present.

That's not the ultimate goal. God is the goal of meditation. Psalm 46, God says to us, Be still, and know that I am God.

The goal is communion and conversation with God, centered on the words that He's provided to us in the Scriptures. Christian meditation is bringing our attention to the revealed words of God, filling our minds and our hearts for the purpose of being with Him.

[11 : 56] See, because in a very real sense, God's words are His presence. God is present to us in His words to us. That's what the psalmist says here in verse 97, Oh, how I love your law.

I meditate on it all day long. Your commands are always with me. Your commands are always with me. He's not simply in love with God's law, because, oh, these are such great rules. These are such great truths and statements.

No, he loves them because this is the voice of God in His ears as he reads the Scriptures. God's voice in His head is God's presence in His heart. When Christians take up the practice of meditation, we are giving attention to God's Word, giving our attention to His very presence with us through those words.

The holy habit of meditation is giving our attention to God, particularly by giving our attention to what He's revealed about Himself and His heart. And very practically, this starts with just reading the Bible.

Just read the Bible. And if that is something that you're not in the habit of practicing, we want to encourage that to you as your first step toward this holy habit of Christian meditation. And if you want to know where to start, look at the back of your liturgies.

[13 : 06] We have a Bible reading plan for everyone to jump right into. It's super simple. But the thing is, though, don't just read it like you might read your news feed or any other literary work.

I mean, yes, you want to understand it, but the difference between our approach to the Bible versus every other human work has to do with what Melissa read in 2 Timothy 3. This is not just any literary work.

It is God-breathed. It is from God. We call it God's Word. We don't need to turn off our brains when we read it, but we definitely need to encounter it, not just as any literary work.

We can bring our questions to it, but we want to make sure that we encounter it the way God intended. We come to the Scriptures not seeking to just fill our minds with mere knowledge or as judges trying to decide whether or not we agree with this or as researchers seeking to objectify the Scriptures and just rationally and empirically understand it.

The Bible is not a cadaver to dissect. Unlike, you know, Beowulf or the Odyssey or the Cat in the Hat, we are meant to have a relationship with the Bible, with the Scriptures, just as Jesus did.

[14 : 13] It's the living and active Word of God and His very voice graciously coming to be present with us. So we don't just read it, and we don't even just study it, though we do both, but we meditate upon it.

Like Jonathan said a couple weeks ago, like a dog on a bone, like a child with a lollipop. We linger, right? We linger with it. We savor it. Focus on the flavors.

Notice its richness in every word. For example, the Lord is my shepherd. The Lord is my shepherd. The one and only, right? The Lord is my shepherd.

The I am. Yahweh is my shepherd. The Lord is my shepherd. He's mine, and I am His. The God of the universe says, I can call Him my own. The Lord is my shepherd, my guide, my protector, my healer, the one who feeds me, the one who pursues me, the crazy, one-of-a-kind shepherd who lays his life down for a sheep.

What kind of shepherd does that? This is what it is to meditate and linger upon and savor God's Word. It's to give it tons of attention and to understand it deeper and deeper and the way it connects with the rest of Scripture and displays the heart of God and the person of Christ.

[15 : 29] Like, wow. The Lord is my shepherd in Christ who said I am the good shepherd. And then we apply it to our lives as well and we pray it into our heads and into our hearts and out into our hands like, Lord, help me to be so convinced that You are my shepherd and that in and through Christ You will prepare a table before me and my cup will overflow.

Convince me so much of those truths that I might abundantly and generously live toward others because I so believe that I have a good shepherd and I shall not want. Thank you, Jesus.

That is the practice of meditation. To meditate on God's Word is to let the teabag of Scripture steep long and deep into the water of our hearts and minds so that our hearts and minds turn the color of God's heart and God's mind and our lives carry out the aroma of Christ.

And one way of really letting that teabag steep is not just through reading Scripture a lot but memorizing it. Hiding it in our hearts. You know, all the people I've ever known who seem to me the godliest, the nearest to Christ, the most rooted, the most self-controlled, unflappable, like non-anxious presence kinds of people, they've all been people who are devoted to memorizing Scripture.

I want to tell you about one of my seminary professors, one of my favorite ones. I TA'd for him and I even did a one-credit thing for him where I memorized Scripture and he gave me a credit for it and it was like super hard.

[17 : 01] His name's Dr. Vern Poitras and he has memorized more Scripture than anyone I've ever known and he's probably the smartest person I've ever met too. He's got two PhDs, one in math from Harvard and then he decided to do another one in New Testament, right?

Incredibly humble guy, very modest and just evidently near to God. Now, as legend has it, at Westminster Seminary, there was a day when Dr. Poitras was eating his lunch over his Bible, just whispering over his Bible with his lunch by himself and another one of our professors goes, hey, Dr. Poitras, what you doing?

Dr. Poitras goes, I'm just memorizing Habakkuk. Oh, you think that's the funny part? All right. So, the other professor's like, oh, why Habakkuk?

Dr. Poitras goes, well, it was the next one. It was the next one. Apparently, Dr. Poitras has memorized the entire New Testament, the entirety of the Psalms, the second half of Isaiah, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon, all the minor prophets, Ruth, and several other portions of the Old Testament.

It's pretty incredible, right? And it wasn't just for show, it's because Dr. Poitras, he's the one who taught me that God's word is God's presence. Dr. Poitras believes in the power and presence of God in the scriptures, in the word of God.

[18 : 24] When we memorize the scriptures, when we memorize the word of God, this powerful personal force that said, let there be light and made it so, that power is stored in our minds and in our hearts and it becomes ready for our lips to bring encouragement to ourselves when we need it and also comfort and blessing to others when they need it.

And I can think of no better example of this than in our church in the life of one of our elders, Brian Lee. I asked him earlier if I could share about how this worked out for him, but, you know, on the day Isaac, his firstborn high school son, passed away almost three years ago now.

He and Sam were at the hospital and Isaac's siblings, Julia and Jack, were on the way to say their last goodbyes. And as they were on their way over, you know, Brian thought to himself as a dad, like, man, what words could I possibly have in a moment like this?

What could I possibly say to Julia and Jack when they arrive? But, you know, at the same time, you know what came to him? Well, at that, in the couple months before, several men in our church had been memorizing John chapter 14 through 17.

It's Jesus' upper room discourse, his last words to his disciples before he goes to the cross. So as he's thinking, what are the words I'm gonna say? What comes to him are Jesus' very first words from that discourse.

[19 : 56] John chapter 14, verse 1, let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God. Believe also in me. In my Father's house, there are many rooms.

If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself that where I am, you may be also.

And you know the way to where I am going. And that is the power of the word of God. See, holy habits are not some weird Christian hobbies, just these religious practices that Christians like to take up so they can consider themselves holy and better than other people.

Now, the holy habits are how we give our attention to the speaking God who wants to be powerfully present with us in every circumstance.

He's the only one who can ground us and empower us as we experience this power in His words. We experience this power when we meditate upon His powerful words, when we give Him and His words our utmost attention.

[21 : 20] We get to enjoy His nearness and we get to be a blessing and a comfort to those around us. And see, this is why our attention is so valuable, so precious.

Our attention is so valuable because it shapes the people we are becoming. We become what we behold or we become what we are beholden to.

When we gaze upon the Lord, we become more like Him. And now, this is where I want to talk about meditation as maintenance. Now, maybe the reason you don't read the Bible or memorize it and certainly don't meditate upon it or really practice any spiritual disciplines at all is because maybe you feel like doing so would just be fake and inauthentic to your shallow or virtually non-existent relationship with God.

And if that's you this morning, one thing I want you to hear is that even if you don't feel like you have a relationship with God or aren't sure if you could have a relationship with God, He wants you to know that He has a relationship with you and He would love to have more of your attention.

Even if you don't consider yourself a Christian this morning, you're invited into this practice of meditation, of drawing your attention to this God you're not even sure that you can believe in.

[22 : 42] See, in this psalm, meditation isn't just something for super Christians. I know it can seem that way with all the enthusiasm that Melissa read Psalm verse 97, but actually, if you follow this psalm from verse 97 onward, you can find a sequence, a progression, a transforming effect that's happening in the heart and mind and in the hands of the psalmist as he practices meditation.

So first, what you see in verses 97 and 99 is like the sustained meditation. It's like the more the psalmist meditates, the more he experiences the presence of God and the wisdom of God.

In verse 98 and then in verse 99, the more surprising insight he discovers about life, insight that his teachers could never even offer him. And then with that, his life is changed.

He finds himself gladly obeying because of the wisdom and insight that he's discovered in the law of the Lord. Verse 100, I have more understanding than the elders for I obey your precepts. And not only is it his life that's changed for the better, but his heart and his desires are changed as well.

He wants to obey. Verse 101, I have kept my feet from every evil path so that I might obey your word. He even wants to be in the presence of God. He doesn't want to depart from God in his words, but sees himself as having been personally taught and guided by God.

[23 : 59] Verse 102, I have not departed from your laws for you yourself have taught me. This sequence that began with meditation leads to further delight in God's words.

Verse 103, how sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey in my mouth. In this sequence, he grows in love with God and with what God says. And he grows in hatred toward the things that lead away from this amazing God.

God. Verse 104, I gain understanding from your precepts, therefore I hate every wrong path. And I point out this sequence to you to indicate that meditation is a holy habit that helps us maintain and develop and nurture a proper and rightful relationship with God.

When we practice Christian meditation of the scriptures, we are tending to our relationship with God. We are nurturing our communion with God and we are growing in it like a gardener ever tending to and developing his garden.

Meditation isn't something we graduate from. It's a daily habit God calls us into that continually shapes us and makes us more like the one we are beholding.

[25 : 08] Blessed is the man whose delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law he meditates day and night and he is like a tree ever growing and reaching toward heaven on high.

Meditation is the practice of maintenance that guides and preserves the process of who we are becoming. This is why in his book that I referenced a couple weeks ago The Common Rule pick it up if you haven't already just in early he commends a rule of life in which we modern western people start our days with scriptures before phone.

Scripture before phone is one of his common rule of life principles. He writes this who am I and who am I becoming these are the questions our morning routines are inevitably asking and answering for us but no words except the words of scripture can bear the weight of a response to these questions.

The story of scripture is clear. We do not know who we are apart from the God who made us and we do not know who we are becoming apart from the God who is renewing us.

Early would remind us that we are made in the image of God meaning that we are all like mirrors. That's what it means to be a human to be a mirror created to reflect everything about God.

[26 : 24] We are our truest selves when we are reflecting the image of this God who is way bigger than us but the problem is sin, right? When we chose to give our attention to other less worthy things the image of God was broken.

It was broken. We became like broken shards of glass broken human beings who have forgotten who we are and what we were made for. So the only solution is for us to redirect our attention to give our attention to our creator once again and to maintain our daily rhythm and habit of turning ourselves toward him that we might reflect him as the best version of ourselves.

He continues to write we become what or who we reflect which is to say we become what we pay attention to. We can't become ourselves by ourselves the way we discover ourselves is by staring at someone else.

When we turn our eyes toward Jesus only there do we finally see the kind of person we were made to be like. We are children of the king perfectly loved not because that's just who we are but because that's who he is making us into.

Our most true sense of identity is found only in the story only in the scriptures which tell of who we are becoming and the story is found in the words of the Bible. We can become ourselves only by gazing on that story.

[27 : 42] Every morning there are other stories competing for our identity. The common rule habit of scripture before phone is intended to cultivate the habit of resisting those stories and embracing the true story.

So the holy habits particularly this holy habit of meditation is what keeps us rooted. rooted in God and rooted in God's story. The holy habits are practices given to us by God in order that we might give him our utmost attention and maintain a regular rhythm of communing with him hearing his voice and enjoying his presence.

Now I want to say one last thing about maintenance. You know I think for a lot of us we hesitate to take up these holy habits because it's hard for us to believe that they're worth our time.

Right? Honestly. Doesn't meditation feel more like a privilege than a priority? Doesn't it feel more costly to not finish the laundry or the dishes or to meet our work deadlines than to miss our daily time of meditation in the word of God?

It doesn't seem costly to skip meditation, right? Does it really form me that much better when I spend time meditating on the words of scripture? I think if we're all honest with ourselves spending time with God and in his word can seem like a drag and unfruitful and worst of all unproductive, right?

[29 : 05] And even when we try to meditate on the scriptures we don't always feel like a tree being nourished by a fresh river, right? Maybe we feel like we're still waiting for that season we're supposedly supposed to bear fruit but it hasn't come yet.

Maybe the idea of meditating on the Bible seems even contrary to our vision of what it means to be a fruitful and healthy tree. If that describes you just like it often describes me, the question for us I think is what if our vision of a flourishing fruitful tree is wrong, is off?

Last week one of our members Jonathan Chang you might know him as the Jonathan of Jonathan and Carlene he suggested that I check out this local Oakland atheist artist and author her name is Jenny Odell and he said he thought there would be a lot of overlap between what Jonathan and I have been preaching and the last two books that she's written so I listened this week on Audible to her New York Times bestseller it's titled How to Do Nothing Resisting the Attention Economy and I was super thankful for the recommendation thank you Jonathan now first you might think that this would just be another book you know critiquing the attention economy warning us about the dangers of it another book about maybe self-care and how to fight you know the hustle culture but what made Jenny's book stand out to me was that she wasn't simply offering the same critique or life advice that you'd find in all these other books she's not anti-technology and she's actually quite annoyed at how self-care and mindfulness have become commercialized and most importantly she is also very critical of the way self-care and

Sabbath have been promoted for the sake of more productivity and more optimization for Jenny O'Dell her commendation to us to do nothing more is not for the sake of making us more efficient and productive and optimized but actually she commends to us to do nothing as an act of resistance against a culture that's all about shallow attention and just hooked on continually churning out new product after new product after new product she writes beyond self-care the practice of doing nothing has something broader to offer us an antidote to the rhetoric of growth she says look around everywhere else in the organic health biological ecological world when we see things that grow unchecked we consider those things as cancerous right or as parasitic yet we inhabit a culture that privileges novelty and growth over the cyclical and the regenerative our very idea of productivity is premised on the idea of producing something new whereas we do not tend to see maintenance and care as productive in the same way and this has really stuck with me this idea that care and maintenance should be valued just as much if not more than novelty and mere production completing new tasks making more new products downloading more new information consuming more new content more and more

I think the picture of the tree in Psalm 1 the blessed person who meditates on the law of the Lord day and night and who is like a tree planted by a river I don't think it's a picture of someone who is making it their primary their number one priority to produce more no fruit is just a natural byproduct of health I think Psalm 1 is a picture of a tree that's simply focused on being a healthy tree on deepening its roots into the river maintaining its relationship with that stream and the fruit doesn't come immediately or even all the time right no the promise is just that it eventually comes in season perhaps even in a season a long way off and yet in God's perfect timing and my question for us is what if that's the kind of tree God wants us to be as we devote ourselves to meditation upon his words with seemingly little to show for it sometimes what if for a time we are called to be rejected trees seen by everybody else as unproductive and unfruitful and ugly and useless because we're not rooted in workaholism and in anxious hustling but because we're rooted in Christ in her book

[33 : 31] Jenny points to this 500 year old tree in Oakland it's called old survivor it's the last remaining old growth tree it's the only pre gold rush tree that the loggers didn't cut down because one it was too hard to get to it was on a steep little hill it was a lot shorter than the other redwoods so they're like we don't really need to get that one and also it had like a strange twisted shape that made it less attractive and less valuable for timber and yet there it stands today as the only one left it's the old survivor precisely because it was just being a tree and yet deemed useless by the industrial impulse toward productivity and to me this is a picture of the narrow way of Jesus where the stone the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone and for us who have eyes to see it is marvelous in our eyes right for the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing but to those of us who are being saved it is what it's the power of

God and this power is for us if we will meditate upon his words and believe him when he says man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God and has he not shown us the power and truth of these words in his living and in his dying and in his living again in every circumstance in joy and in sorrow he was always meditating upon the words of his father day and night this is the God we are called to give our attention to this is the kind of God who is worthy of our utmost attention he is the vine of life who invites us to abide in him as his life giving words abide in us so let's be that kind of people let's be those kinds of trees better yet let's be a garden here in the east bay for the glory of God and for the good of our neighbors let's pray Lord make us like that kind of a tree would you save us from superficial understandings of productivity and usefulness and worth and value would you give us the mind and eyes of

Christ and would you do that in us as we meditate upon your word would you shape our minds and shape our hearts and shape our lives after the pattern of Jesus he is the ultimate tree of someone even though he was one who died and was cursed upon a tree he rose again to show us that we can trust in your word we can love your word we can dedicate ourselves to it and even though we may die we will rise again just like our savior in him we pray amen