

“The Very Best Thing You Can Do”
(A Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter)

Text: Psalm 1

Lectionary Texts: Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; 1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19; Psalm 1

Subject: Meditation on God’s Word.

Desired Response: Make meditation a regular practice.

How To: Use the suggested prayer provided.

How Long: Refer to the written prayer whenever you spend time in God’s Word until the practice of meditation seems habitual.

Sermon in a Sentence: “God wants His children to learn the value of stability that comes from meditating on His written Word.”

Worship Theme: “As devoted children, we should both read and meditate on God’s written Word.”

Today, in the United States, both the secular world and the Christian world take a moment to express gratitude for the one person without whom none of us would exist: our mothers. Now, I’m not diminishing the role that fathers may play in this equation. But, dads, you will get your turn next month—though for the most part you don’t get nearly as much celebration sent your way as moms do.

Some of us, myself included, have more than one mother. I have the woman who nurtured me inside her body for nine months and then went through the excruciating process of giving birth. And, I have the lovely woman who adopted me six weeks after I was born and raised me as her very own, dearly loved child. In my adult years, even though I never knew my birth mother, through intense psychological counseling, as a part of my training in college and beyond, I learned how profoundly both of my mothers have shaped my life. It’s amazing and wonderful and somewhat scary, all at the same time.

We want to give all the praise that is due our mothers today. Even if you were one who lived in a situation where your mother was either totally absent or wasn't really all that great of a mom, you still owe a debt of gratitude that can best be expressed by the words, “Thank you, mom! I love you!”

In giving recognition and appropriate praise to our mothers, we should also remain conscious of all the other women who have had a profound impact on our lives. We should especially take note of those women who have nurtured us, but who may not have had the role of “mom” in their own families.

Many women have never had the experience of giving birth or raising children of their own. A large number of these women likely did not choose to forgo becoming moms. Some, though married, could not bear children. Others, remained single, or became widows, or otherwise lost their husbands without having any children. We must not forget the key role many of these lovely women played and the significant impact they have had on our lives.

One such woman, in my own life, was Marion Helenbrook. Marion is sitting at the feet of Jesus now. But, when I was a child growing up in the Hill Memorial Evangelical United Brethren Church in Bradford, Pennsylvania, Marion Helenbrook taught Sunday School. Marion was a single lady—what my mother tenderly and lovingly referred to as “an unclaimed blessing.” She worked as the court reporter for the McKean County court system. She was very bright, very proper, and actually was a very beautiful woman.

Most importantly, Marion Helenbrook loved God, revered His Son, Jesus, and did her best, week after week, to diligently study so that she could teach children the joys and blessings of God's written Word. Her testimony of love for Christ still resonates within me. She had a very significant effect on my life. I am embarrassed to admit that I never took the opportunity to tell her how much she meant to me. And, I am looking forward to making sure that, when I get to heaven, I spend some time thanking her for the influence she had on my life.

So, on this Mother's Day, I want to focus the attention of my sermon on women. I do so because it is my sincere belief that you women have an enormous impact on the spiritual formation of everyone: boys, girls, men, and especially on other women. I want to give you wonderful ladies a serious suggestion that I've been so bold as to title: “The Very Best Thing You Can Do.”

Let me begin with what will likely seem to you as a very odd question I saw recently in an advertisement in a magazine. The ad copy asked: “Are you a social misfit? Do you envy those who seem to know precisely what to

say and exactly how to act? Well then, read the Art of Knowing Who You Are and What You’re Supposed to Be When Other People Are Around, a book by a world authority on charm, Princess Luciabelli, and discover yourself becoming a person of great magnetism.”

Have you ever seen advertisements of this type? What would you say to someone noted for her abrasive ways and lack of tact if she said, “Please! Don’t bother me right now! I have these three more chapters to read in Princess Luciabelli’s new book before I become ‘charming.’”

“What do you mean?” you ask.

“This ad says that if I just read this book, I’ll be transformed overnight into a charming person. Now, get out of here, already! I only have a couple chapters more to read.”

Would you attempt to explain that it’s all a little more complex than that?

“M’am, the key isn’t in just reading it. Rather, the ideas have to be applied over a period of time. Why, your expectations are not really reasonable.”

“Hey, you!” she might well respond. “You’re bothering me. I’m almost done.”

As strange as it may sound, sometimes I feel this is the same mind-set a lot of people bring to the study of God’s written Word. They want to become spiritually mature, and this is good. They correctly see that the Scriptures play a major role in achieving this desire for deeper spiritual formation. But, for some reason, they think that mere “reading” is the key, when actually another word is far more important.

In contrast to merely “reading” the Bible, we need to develop the discipline of “meditating” on it. But what does that word “meditate” actually mean?

The dictionary defines it as “thinking deeply and continuously, reflecting, pondering, musing.” Because, in our society, meditation is often associated with Eastern mystical religions, Christians have a tendency to categorize the word “meditate” as the exclusive domain of skinny, bearded old men, sitting cross-legged in caves or on a bed of nails. But, that’s really not fair!

I'm sure you've heard about the three hermits who were so disillusioned with society and its inability to love that they decided to dedicate themselves to a life of isolation. Their rule was that none could speak except once in every five years, and then only one would be allowed to give his thought. He would be limited to a single sentence.

At the end of the initial period of five years, the first of the trio was ready to share the special insight he had gained. Suddenly, a great bird swooped overhead. Caught up in the excitement of the moment, he involuntarily blurted out, “My, look at that glorious eagle!” Unfortunately, his momentary lapse of judgment caused him to lose his opportunity to share.

Five years later, the second hermit had his chance. Obviously he had been waiting a long time to say, “It wasn't an eagle. It was a hawk!” And, I'm told another five years passed before the third finally stated angrily, “If you two are going to argue all the time, I'm leaving.”

Putting these somewhat foolish thoughts behind us, we need to understand that meditation is a genuinely biblical concept. A few lines recorded in Psalm 119:27, 48, and 97 read:

Let me understand the teaching of your precepts; then I will meditate on your wonders...

I lift up my hands to your commands, which I love, and I meditate on your decrees...

Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long...

In fact, the word “meditate” appears twice more in Psalm 119.

Following the death of Moses, God said to Joshua, as recorded in Joshua 1:8:

This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall have good success.

The same thought of prosperity and success resulting from meditating on God's written Word is captured in Psalm 1, my sermon text for today:

¹ Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, ² but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his

law day and night. ³ That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers.

⁴ Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away.

⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. ⁶ For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

Let me see if I can plant a new picture in your mind of this old word, “meditation,” and thus, bring this word to life for you.

Pretend that someone very important offers to share the secret of his or her success. You are welcome to meet with him or her whenever you want, even if it is at a moment’s notice. But by his or her insistence, the visits are to be structured in a somewhat peculiar fashion.

The first half of your time together, this counselor will give you advice. Then, he or she will stop and ask that you repeat the gist of what he or she has said. Once satisfied that you understand, this counselor next insists that you quietly spend the remaining minutes in his or her presence while you think about how the counselor’s words apply to your life and whether or not you will obey them. All the meetings are to follow this pattern:

1. The counselor gives advice
2. The counselor asks you to repeat what you have heard him or her say.
3. The remaining time is spent in the counselor’s presence thinking about how the advice applies to your life and whether or not you will follow that advice.

Meditation is exactly this. When I talk of “meditating” on the Bible, I’m not suggesting that you begin searching for some mystical experience. Instead, I’m saying that, among other ways, God has chosen to reveal Himself through His written Word.

To read a chapter here and a few verses there, hit and miss, is not adequate. We need to meditate, to read carefully, and then to think over the passage to make sure we understand it. Finally, when still in God’s presence, we need to reflect on the meaning of these thoughts He has shared with us and what possible changes we need to make in our lives.

Regular meditation will inject into our spiritual bloodstream great amounts of maturity. And, we will become a righteous and stable human being. That’s the thrust of the message contained in the Scripture passages we examined earlier.

In a sentence, Psalm 1 is saying: *“God wants His children to learn the value of stability that comes from meditating on His written Word.”* Let me repeat that. The message the Psalmist conveys in Psalm 1 is expressed in these words: *“God wants His children to learn the value of stability that comes from meditating on His written Word.”*

Remember Psalm 1? The one who meditates is like a tree that yields its fruit in its season. Its leaf does not wither because it is planted by streams of water. Such a one prospers in all that he or she does.

I know it’s hard to retain such thoughts even though they sound good, so I’ve incorporated them into a prayer. Using this prayer that I’ve written for you is my way of giving you a method of adding meditation into your spiritual formation. You might consider this prayer a “How To”—a simple step to help you become the woman or man that God wants each one of us to become.

I’m urging you to pray this prayer immediately after you read God’s written Word. With a sense of wonder, you come to an imaginary table where God has laid out His finest wares. And then, you feed on God’s written Word. Afterwards, speak to God the following prayer:

Father, I count it a great privilege to have just read from your eternal written Word. To make sure I haven’t missed anything important, I want to review the material I covered.

If I find my memory to be faulty, I’d like to scan the section again or read it through a second time. Before considering how these words apply to my life, I want to make sure I’ve received what You’re communicating as accurately as possible.

Then, take a moment to review what you’ve read. Having done this, continue with the prayer:

Now with a good understanding of the actual content of this passage, I invite the Holy Spirit to apply this Word from You to my life. I intend to afford You whatever quiet time You need to reveal to me the bearing these chapters have on how I live. Are my actions consistent with what I read? Do I need further work to bring my life into conformity with Your divine standard? What old lessons might I have forgotten?

Again, pause and reflect on how your life compares to what you’ve read and the specific actions you need to take. Then continue:

I thank You for sharing with me in this time of reflection. Be assured that I intend to live in accord with Your desires. Because I believe the practice of meditation on God’s written Word produces stability, I would like to arrange to meet again around the sacred Scriptures on _____. (And, make plans regarding the date, time, and place for your next session in God’s written Word.) Amen.

To be as helpful as possible, I’ve included a printed copy of this prayer with your bulletin for today. I strongly urge you to fit a copy of this prayer into the front of your Bible. Refer to it whenever you spend time in God’s Word. It can change you from a mere “reader” to a “meditator”—from someone with unreal expectations to a stable believer who is maturing beautifully in faith. The key to deepening our spiritual formation comes about when we move beyond the mere “reading” of the Scripture text.

In 1865, William Ross Wallace wrote the following poem. You’ve likely heard only one line quoted from it, so I wanted to share it in its entirety.

Blessings on the hand of women!
Angels guard its strength and grace.
In the palace, cottage, hovel,
Oh, no matter where the place;
Would that never storms assailed it,
Rainbows ever gently curled,
For the hand that rocks the cradle
Is the hand that rules the world.

Infancy’s the tender fountain,
Power may with beauty flow,
Mothers first to guide the streamlets,
From them souls unresting grow—
Grow on for the good or evil,
Sunshine streamed or evil hurled,
For the hand that rocks the cradle
Is the hand that rules the world.

Woman, how divine your mission,
Here upon our natal sod;
Keep—oh, keep the young heart open
Always to the breath of God!
All true trophies of the ages
Are from mother-love impearled,
For the hand that rocks the cradle
Is the hand that rules the world.

Blessings on the hand of women!
Fathers, sons, and daughters cry,
And the sacred song is mingled
With the worship in the sky—
Mingles where no tempest darkens,
Rainbows evermore are hurled;
For the hand that rocks the cradle
Is the hand that rules the world.

As a mother, as any woman who has a profound impact on the spiritual lives of others—and it is my belief that women have an overwhelmingly important effect on the spiritual growth of everyone around them—you need to continue to develop the depth of your own spiritual formation. You women play such a critical role in the Kingdom of God.

The very best gift I could give to each one of you women, on this very special day that the world we live in sets aside to honor your role, is to encourage you to learn how to truly meditate on God’s written Word. In so doing, you are literally practicing the very Presence of Christ in your lives. His divine Presence within you will spring forth, in a miraculous way, to touch the minds and hearts of every other person who crosses the pathway of your lives.

I urge you to take to heart what I’ve shared today. And, once you have made meditating on Scripture a key part of your own, personal spiritual discipline, encourage your children—or the children God may have placed in your life—and the men, as well, to adopt this same discipline.

In closing, I would like to share a chorus the mother of my very dear friend and boss, Dr. David Mains, wrote, many years ago. These words capture this reflective attitude of meditating on Scripture that is so important to our spiritual growth. The words read:

Search the Scriptures daily,
You will find a wealth untold
Within the pages of God's Word
More precious far than gold.
Take time to read the Bible,
'Tis God's message sent to you.
But as you search the Scriptures,
Let the Scriptures search you, too.

"God wants His children to learn the value of stability that comes from meditating on His written Word." Dear ladies—and everyone else, too—it's "The Very Best Thing You Can Do." Amen.