

A NEW YEAR

a letter from Pastor Shiv Muthukumar

parts of the Bible that we understand or appreciate. But we are to receive the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27) and live by “every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Deut. 8:3, Matt. 4:4). Therefore, it is ideal to use a Bible reading plan that takes you through Scripture in an orderly manner.

1. **Prayer Log.** The Lord Jesus gave us the Lord’s Prayer (Luke 11:2-4) in response to another prayer, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). Prayer is hard. Prayer is learned. It is a struggle. So don’t be discouraged. “Teach me to pray” has become one of my most earnest prayers. Use a method to pray effectively: prayer journals, note cards, prayer calendars, etc. Experiment to discover what works best for you. You may use the ACTS (adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication) model, pray the Lord’s prayer every day, pray what is on your heart and mind.

Bible Reading Plans

We have made available a few reading plans to suit different levels of maturity and seasons of life:

1. **American Bible Society Daily Bible Reading Guide (2019)**
 - 10 minutes / 1 chapter per day
 - Every month’s readings are based on a theme.
 - Special readings for Lent, Advent, and other significant days.
2. **Zondervan’s 180 Day Guided tour of the Bible**
 - 10 minutes / 1 chapter per day
 - Chapters selected roughly in chronological order.
3. **DesJardin’s Thematic Bible Reading Plan (2019)**
 - 30 minutes / 2-4 chapters per day
 - Developed by Craig DesJardins of Faith Presbyterian Church in Tacoma.
 - Read the whole Bible in a year.
 - Aligned to help you make associations between different parts of Scripture.
4. **M’Cheyne Bible Reading Plan**
 - 45 minutes / 4-5 chapters per day
 - Takes you through OT once, NT and Psalms twice in a year.

As we approach a new year, it is natural for us to desire renewal. Many people make new year resolutions, a sign that we desire change and yet feel weak in effecting that change. So, we vow to ourselves and seek accountability. Yet, we all know how quickly even resolutions fail to sustain us on the path to change. Why is that? And how can we truly change?

A Confession

Over a year ago, I picked up Jamie Smith’s book *You are What you Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* at the CPC book table. Smith’s notion of “what you are doing is doing something to you” hit me like a ton of bricks. Subconsciously, I had believed that right doctrine alone is sufficient for Christian life. But then I was led by the Holy Spirit to examine my habits of eating, sleeping, exercise, technology use, social media use, reading, prayer and more. In the name of “freedom,” I had developed many bad habits and carried them into my Christian life. Even till my last year of seminary, I never had a year in which I consistently read Scripture and prayed!

Path to Freedom

In his book, Jamie Smith connects three insights known to the ancient world that we have lost (from chapter 1):

1. **Hearts not Brains:** We tend to think of human beings as “brains-on-a-stick.” In the church, this turns us into students of theology, but not disciples of Jesus. The biblical view of human being is not a brain, but a heart. Our hearts are not merely the seat of our feelings, but “the seat of our longings and desires.” Our desires orient and direct us like a compass. Essentially, you are what you *love*, not what you think.
2. **Love Is a Habit:** Secondly, love is a habit, an instinct, a gut-level response that does not need thinking. Being from India, I love curry; and my wife, from Korea, likes kimchi. We did not think our way into it. Our practices turned into desires, appetites and even cravings. *What we are doing is doing something to us.* Smith goes on to argue that we are “liturgical beings” – our lives are an accretion of routines and rituals that shape our hearts.

3. **Love takes Practice:** If we are what we love and love is a habit, then discipleship is a re-habitation of our loves - a *reformation* of our hearts and not simply acquiring *information*. In other words, love takes practice. No wonder new year resolutions don't last long. We cannot simply *think* our way into Christian sanctification. Our hearts need to be scraped and chiseled to acquire new desires and forfeit old ones. This is why God instituted weekly Sabbath rest, annual feasts (Leviticus 23), the sabbath year and even the year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25). Their purpose was to re-train the heart of Israel to holiness - to love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength (Deut. 6:5).

Evidence from Scripture

Jamie Smith is simply making explicit the assumptions held by Scripture. Consider:

1. **A Spiritual Gymnasium:** Apostle Paul, writing to his spiritual child, Timothy, uses these words: train, toil, strive, set an example, devote, progress, keep a close watch, persist (1 Tim. 4). This is what growing in godliness looks like. "For while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds the promise for the present life and also for the life to come" (1 Tim. 4:8).
2. **A Higher Calling:** Writing again to Timothy before his death, Paul likens following Christ to being a soldier, an athlete and a farmer (2 Tim. 2:3-5). These vocations involve practice, training, patience, perseverance and even pain. But how often do we think of Christian life in these categories?
3. **God's Fatherly Discipline:** This is not a call to "try harder" as a Christian. We are to run this marathon of Christian life with endurance looking unto Jesus - who is both the founder and the *perfecter* of our faith (Hebrews 12:1-2). It is a call to submit to the discipline of the Lord through his indwelling Holy Spirit. The author of Hebrews promises that though this discipline may seem painful now in due time it will yield the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it (Hebrews 12:7-11).

This is a call to a Spirit-led re-formation of our hearts by examining our habits and practices and being intentional about taking countermeasures to develop new desires and longings (Smith, pg. 22).

A Most Significant Habit

There might be many habits that the Holy Spirit wants to change in you. But I consider the most significant habit that we all need to develop is: **to meditate on God's Word and pray in the morning**. David, a man after God's own heart, vowed to the Lord, "I will awake the dawn!" (Psalm 57:8) and again, "O Lord, in the morning you hear my voice, in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch" (Psalm 5:3). I am not a "morning person," if there is such a thing, but I know that to wake up in the morning and be in the Lord's presence is to be my lifeline, the fountain-head of my life and ministry.

Our daily devotions are a tangible act of abiding in Christ that sets us up for abiding in him throughout the day. Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches... apart from me you can do *nothing*" (John 15:5). If we don't do it in the morning, we will struggle to do it rest of the day. And the tyranny of the urgent will squeeze out the important, leaving us with a heart that is not trained to long for God. The Lord Jesus himself, during his earthly life, made this a daily habit (Mark 2:35).

Some Practical Suggestions

We all know how easy it is for our minds to wander during our prayers, or to think of something else while reading Scripture. Jesus withdrew to isolated places to pray because we are embodied persons, not just brains. It is not surprising that the medieval church developed various rules (e.g. the Rule of Saint Benedict) to help Christians grow in godliness. Of course, it is possible for us to fall into mere religiosity. Scottish minister Robert Murray M'Cheyne himself lists the dangers of using his Bible reading plan to his congregation - degeneration into lifeless religion, self-righteousness, careless reading and joyless burden. Yet, these are risks worth taking in order to re-form our hearts, asking the Lord to keep us from these dangers.

1. **Time and Place.** Identify a time or a slot in your daily routine when you can do your devotions. Mornings are best, before your heart and mind get occupied with the business of the day. In addition, it is advisable to find a place where you can *withdraw*. I do it in my study room, but not at my desk where my computer sits. You may even consider doing a portion of your devotions together with your family.
2. **Bible Reading Plan.** For Scripture meditation, it is important to follow a Bible reading plan. The benefits far outweigh the alternatives. We all have the tendency to gravitate towards those part