

Let's keep our Bibles open right there at Psalm 1. This morning we're starting a new, three week-series called "Personal Spiritual Formation." In the past 50 years or so, the topic of spiritual formation has gained a lot of popularity. Books on spiritual formation have hit the New York Times bestsellers list, degrees in spiritual formation have launched at seminaries, and it's not uncommon to find a church with a pastor or director of spiritual formation. But, as you can imagine, different people mean different things when they use this phrase. So, I'd like to begin by explaining what I mean by personal spiritual formation. And as we consider these three words, I'll explain why I've chosen to focus on this topic for the next three weeks.

First, by formation, I am referring to the important process of growing into the image of Christ.

Formation: Growing into the image of Christ

If you are a Christian, growing into the image of Christ is your destiny. *For*, as Romans 8:29 says, *those whom [God] foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son...* (Romans 8:29).

Before you ever knew Jesus, God planned to make you like Jesus, to conform you into the image of his Son. Legos have become a new item in our home, which means I can look forward to stepping on small, painful, pieces of plastic more often! But I'm excited to have Legos in our house. It's a lot of fun to look at that picture on the box, and then slowly put the pieces together until the image becomes a reality. And that's what God is doing in each of our lives. We are painfully aware of how unlike Jesus we are, but God is committed to making the image a reality! The work is in progress now, but God will finish what he's started. Christlikeness is our destiny.

At the same time, the pursuit of Christlikeness is our responsibility. Unlike Legos, which are totally passive in the hand of the builder, we are called to actively pursue this kind of growth. *We are*, as Paul says in Ephesians 4:15, *to grow up in every way... into Christ* (Ephesians 4:15). And that growth takes real effort.

Now, the Scriptures are very clear: we are saved by grace alone. We enter God's kingdom and become his people through a gift we did not deserve and could never have earned. We were lost in our sin, rebels against God from birth, but he redeemed us by grace. He sent his Son to die the death we deserved, his Son Jesus, who loved us and gave himself for us, and who rose again so that we might receive the gift of everlasting life. But having saved us from sin, God now calls us to pursue holiness, to grow in Christlikeness. And again, that growth takes real effort. This is why the author of Hebrews tells us to *Strive for... holiness* (Hebrews 12:14). This is why Paul tells us to, *Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness* (1 Timothy 6:11).

So, formation, growth in Christlikeness, is both our destiny and our responsibility. But praise God, he has not left us to engage in this pursuit on our own. He has given us his own Holy Spirit. And that brings us to the word "spiritual." By spiritual, I am referring to the biblical command to keep in step with the Holy Spirit.

Spiritual: Keeping in step with the Holy Spirit

I'm taking that language from Galatians 5:25, where Paul writes, *If we live by the Spirit, let us*

also keep in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:25).

This is a reminder that the Holy Spirit, who gives us new life in Christ, also empowers us to live like Christ. And our responsibility is to follow where he leads, to walk by his strength, to keep in step with the Spirit. This is the Christian meaning of the word “spiritual.” In fact, two verses later, Paul mentions *you who are spiritual*. And he’s talking about you who live by the power of the Holy Spirit. The word “spiritual” is growing in popularity these days. Increasingly we hear of people who call themselves “spiritual but not religious.” A Canadian researcher recently tried to find out what people mean by this term. And here’s his summary, “When people call themselves spiritual they are basically signaling three things: first, that they believe there is more to the world than meets the eye, that is to say, more than the mere material. Second, that they try to attend to their inner life, to their mental and emotional states, in the hopes of gaining a certain kind of self-knowledge. Third, that they value the following virtues: being compassionate, empathetic and open-hearted.”¹

As Christians, we can agree that there’s reality beyond what we see with our eyes—including our inner life as human beings—and that compassion, empathy, and love are noble virtues. However, when we use the word spiritual we’re talking about something more. We’re talking about keeping in step with God’s Holy Spirit, as he forms us into the image of Christ. So, this is what I mean by spiritual formation. And finally, by using the word “personal,” I’m referring to how we pursue holiness individually.

Personal: Pursuing holiness individually

Let me be very clear: Jesus has not called us to follow him on our own. He has blessed us with the gift of the church, which is essential to our spiritual formation. And we could have a whole sermon series on how God has designed the church to help us keep in step with the Spirit and grow in Christlikeness. But that does not negate the value of private, personal devotion to the Lord. And it’s this component of the Christian life that I want to emphasize in this series. What can we do *individually* to foster a close walk with God? And this is where the literature on spiritual formation begins to get very broad, as many people give many answers to that question, sometimes suggesting we simply discern what spiritual practices work best for us.

For example, one author writes, “To be honest, I don’t really know how you’re best going to achieve intimacy with God. I [only] know what’s worked for me...” But Christian professor and author, Matthew Bingham, writes: “Such statements have an apparent air of open-minded generosity that is undeniably attractive in our cultural moment. But ultimately, your spiritual life is not a Spotify playlist, and we must be on guard against the naïve notion that the best way to judge a spiritual tool is to ask whether it works for me.”²

So, how do we discern the right tools for the pursuit of personal spiritual formation? Here’s Bingham again: “The Bible repeatedly highlights some things rather than others as the tools that God has given his people for growing in their walk with him. Our job, then, is not to invent new ‘spiritual practices’ that seem attractive or appealing to us but rather to take up with fresh vigor and appropriate creativity those practices already given.” Then, Bingham helpfully highlights

¹ Quoted in Bingham, *A Heart Aflame for God*, 43.

² Bingham, *A Heart Aflame for God*, 54.

three particular tools:

- Scripture
- Meditation
- Prayer

And over the next three weeks, I want us to think about how we can incorporate these three practices into our lives so that we might keep in step with the Spirit and grow into the image of Christ. We're starting with Scripture this week, and with the remainder of our time, I want us to consider the blessing of Bible reading and how we can read the Bible well. We'll begin with...

1. The Blessing of Bible Reading

And this brings us to Psalm 1. That was my longest sermon introduction ever, but I haven't forgotten about our passage today! Look with me at Psalm 1:1-2: *Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night* (Psalm 1:1-2).

Psalm 1 presents us with two ways to live. There is the path of wicked counsel, sinful behavior, and arrogant scoffing. Or there is the path of blessing. Notice Psalm 1 begins with the words, "Blessed is the man..." The Psalmist is saying, "Let me tell you the best way to live!" And what is the way? It's the way we find as we delight in the law of the Lord, the instruction of the Lord, the Word of the Lord. Do this, Psalm 1 says, and you will be like a tree.

Look at verse 3: ***He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers*** (Psalm 1:3).

We've planted multiple trees in our backyard over the past couple of summers. And clearly, no one in our house is an arborist, because each of those poor little trees has withered, snapped, and ended up in a pile of yard waste. But the tree in this Psalm is the exact opposite. This is a strong and stable tree, well-nourished and full of life, bearing much fruit. And these are the blessings of immersing your life in the Bible. You will find...

A. Stability

He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers (Psalm 1:3).

Life in this world can feel so unstable, so shaky and uncertain, so scary and unsettling. In all candor, I felt very unsettled this week, deeply disturbed and grieved by the evil we witnessed.

And when we feel that, when we're shaken by the darkness of life in this fallen world, the ultimate source of stability and strength is found right here. When we open the pages of Scripture and fix our eyes upon our great God and Savior, on who he is and all he has promised to do for us, we will find strength. We'll hear him speak words like those found in Isaiah 41:10, where God says to us, *Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand* (Isaiah 41:10).

Immerse your life in the Bible and you will find stability. You will also find...

B. Nourishment

*He is like a tree planted **by streams of water** that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers (Psalm 1:3).*

One of the reasons the trees keep dying in our backyard is that we keep forgetting to water them. Without water, the trees cannot take in the moisture and nutrients they need to survive.

Similarly, without the regular intake of Scripture, without receiving the truths of God's Word, we will be spiritually malnourished. This is why God often refers to his Word as food for our souls.

As Deuteronomy 8:3 says, *Man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD (Deuteronomy 8:3).*

Or as the prophet Jeremiah says, *Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart (Jeremiah 15:16).*

Church, if we want to grow in Christlikeness, we must feed upon God's Word. And as we do, we will find stability, and nourishment, and...

C. Fruitfulness

*He is like a tree planted by streams of water **that yields its fruit in its season**, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers (Psalm 1:3).*

Before our oldest was born, someone prayed for her, that her life would count for Christ. I've never forgotten that prayer, and Kristen and I pray it often for all our children and for ourselves. We want our lives to count for Christ and his kingdom. Don't you? Well, how will that happen? What will cause our lives to fill up with fruit for the glory of God and the good of his people? Digging deep roots into the Word of God. His Word, which is like a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, showing us the kind of life that pleases and honors him.

And remember, none of us can pursue that kind of life in our own strength! In fact, on our own we were walking in the disobedience of our sin and dishonoring him. But Christ came and saved us, and he put his Spirit within us, so that we might walk in newness of life—a stable, nourished, fruitful life, the kind of life he himself lived! A life rooted in the Word. Friends, that is the best way to live! The alternative is in verse 4, where the Psalmist says, *The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away (Psalm 1:4).* No one wants that. So, believe in Christ, and seek the blessings found in his Word.

But how can I do this? Well, I'm glad you asked! Next, let's consider...

2. How to Read the Bible

Here I want to get practical. I want to offer you four ways to read the Bible, which all come out of

Psalm 1, verse 2. I want you to see how this verse commends Bible reading that is:

- Regular
- Attentive
- Dependent
- And Expectant.

Let's take those one at a time. First, read...

A. Regularly

Psalm 1 speaks about the person who experiences a truly blessed life, and verse 2 says, *his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates **day and night*** (Psalm 1:2).

Each year, the American Bible Society releases a report on the state of Bible reading in America. Encouragingly, the number of Americans reading the Bible is increasing. There are more people engaging with the Bible in 2025 than there were in 2024, with the largest increases happening among millennials and men. However, as good as that is, the American Bible Society defines Bible engagement as reading at least 3 times per year. That's a pretty low bar. It's certainly not day and night. But that's where the real blessing is found, in regular Bible reading.

And I know it's not easy! I know it can feel hard to find the time in our often overly crowded schedules. But, let me ask you something, busy as you are, do you only eat 3 times per year?

No, we all take in food for our bodies because we know it's necessary to sustain our physical lives! And we've been reminded today that Scripture is necessary to sustain our spiritual lives.

So, friends, let's make the time to read regularly. And as we do, let's read...

B. Attentively

*...his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law **he meditates day and night*** (Psalm 1:2).

Our whole sermon next week is going to focus on meditation, so I won't dig too deeply here today. However, that word matters. We will miss out on the Biblical blessings of stability, nourishment, and fruitfulness if all we do is pass over the words with our eyes without ever taking them into our hearts. Our goal in Bible reading is not quantity, it's quality.

It reminds me of a quote from an author named Nicholas Carr, who wrote a book called *The Shallows*. Subtitle: *What the internet is doing to our brains*. It's not a book about Bible reading. But Carr speaks about the way our attention is so fragmented in our digital age, and how it keeps us from diving deeply into any text. And Carr writes, "Once I was a scuba diver in a sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski."

Church, when we read God's Word. We don't just want to zip along the surface. We want to dive deep. And that might mean in-depth study. But you can also go deep by chewing on a single verse, turning it over in your mind, until it presses its way into your heart. Again, more

on this next week, but we want to read attentively. And we want to read...

C. Dependently

...*his **delight** is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night* (Psalm 1:2).

Now, why didn't I say that we should read "delightfully"? Enjoying and savoring the text? Because it's important to understand where delight in God's Word comes from. And it does not ultimately come from us. Delight in God's Word is a gift of God's grace. As Pastor John Piper says, "In the end, seeing is a gift... God's Spirit opens the eyes of our heart, and what was once boring, or absurd, or foolish, or mythical is now self-evidently real. You can pray and ask God for that miracle. I ask daily for fresh eyes for his glory."³

For some of us, this might be the most important part of the message. Because you know the Bible is good, beautiful, and important. You even set aside time to read it. But you struggle because when you do read it, you have a hard time understanding it, and your heart is not stirred by it. Well, here's the good news: It's not ultimately your intelligence that will make Scripture clear, or your ability to stir up your own affections that will make Scripture compelling. God does these things! And you can ask him, before you open your Bible, to *open your eyes to see marvelous things in his Word* (Psalm 119:18).

Read regularly, read attentively, read dependently. And lastly, read...

D. Expectantly

...*his delight is in **the law of the LORD**, and on his law he meditates day and night* (Psalm 1:2).

When you pick up the Bible, always remember that you are about to read the law of the LORD. The instructions—the voice—of God. Here's Piper one more time. He says, "The Bible is not the private charter of a faith community among other faith communities. It is a total claim on the whole world. God, the creator, owner, and governor of the world has spoken. His words are valid and binding on all people everywhere. That is what it means to be God. And to our astonishment, his way of speaking with unique, infallible authority in the twenty-first century is through a book."⁴

This is God's book. In these pages God speaks! If God was sitting in your living room, inviting you to speak with him, would you ignore him? I don't think so. So, don't leave his Word sitting on a shelf. Open the Bible and read with expectation, knowing that the God of the universe is about to speak to you.

Conclusion

We cannot talk about personal spiritual formation without talking about Scripture. If we want to grow into the image of Christ, we must behold Christ as he is revealed in the Word. If we want

³ Piper, *Peculiar Glory*, 283.

⁴ Ibid., 281.

to keep in step with the Spirit, we must walk according to the Scriptures that he himself inspired and authored. And if we want to pursue growth individually, we must not neglect personal Bible intake. We want to read regularly, attentively, dependently, and expectantly, so that we might enjoy the blessings of stability, nourishment, and fruitfulness that come from a life spent in the Word.

In the 17th century there was a woman named Katherine Clarke. After her death, her husband wrote this tribute. He said, "There was no day that passed over her head (except sickness, or some other unavoidable necessity...) wherein she did not read some portions of the Sacred Scriptures... [And] in reading she took special notice of such passages as most concerned herself."⁵

After Katherine died, her husband found a piece of paper in her drawer, on which she had written down verses that spoke particularly to her heart. He said the paper was almost worn out, it was falling apart, because Katherine had held it so often. Throughout her life, Katherine held onto the Word of God. And through the Word, God held onto Katherine. May we all enjoy the same blessings as we read the Scriptures.

So, here's a challenge for this week: What if for the next 7 days, you made it your aim to read the Bible every day. If you don't own a Bible, take one from under the seat. It's a gift! If you don't know where to start, pick one of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke or John), and read a little about Jesus each day. Ask God to open your eyes to see wonderful things as you open his Word.

⁵ Quoted in Bingham, *A Heart Aflame*, 126.