

CHAPTER 11

AN UNDIVIDED LIFE

The Practice of Reflection on Scripture

Woe to those weak and timid souls who are divided between God and their world! They want and they do not want. They are torn by desire and remorse at the same time. . . . They have a horror of evil and a shame of good. They have the pains of virtue without tasting its sweet consolations. O how wretched they are.

FRANÇOIS FÉNELON

Purity of heart is to will one thing.

SØREN KIERKEGAARD

Purity is a wonderful thing. When something is pure, it exists in its essential nature — undefiled, unblemished, uncontaminated.

We are serious about some forms of purity in American society. A whole department of the federal government, the Food and Drug Administration, is charged with monitoring and protecting the purity of what we eat. But our standards of purity are not always what we might hope. Here are the federal guidelines of purity for a few familiar products:

Apple butter: If the mold count is 12 percent or more, if it averages 4 rodent hairs per 100 grams or more, if it averages 5 or more whole insects (not counting mites, aphids, or scale insects) per 100 grams, the FDA will pull it from the shelves. Otherwise, it will go right onto your English muffins.

Coffee beans: (Caffeine addicts beware!) Coffee beans will get withdrawn from the market if an average of 10 percent or more are insect-infested or if there is one live insect in each of 2 or more immediate containers. (The FDA says people just don't like getting too many live insects with their coffee beans — one container is okay, but with more than that we draw the line.)

Mushrooms: Mushrooms can't be sold if there is an average of 20 or more maggots of any size per 15 grams of dried mushrooms.

Fig paste: If there are more than 13 insect heads per 100 grams of fig paste in each of 2 or more subsamples, the FDA ruthlessly tosses the whole batch. (Apparently other insect body parts are tolerable, but we don't want to be staring at too many insect heads.)

Hot dogs: You don't want to know about it.

If anything is really good, we long for it to exist in its pure form: oxygen without exhaust fumes; snow unmixed with slush.

This holds true of the people we know. Purity is a word greatly prized in the New Testament. Unfortunately, in our day it has been largely lost. It sounds quaint, Victorian, prudish, bloodless. It sounds as if a person isn't fully human, when actually God's call for us to be *pure* is precisely his call for us to be *purely human* — humanity as he intended it to be, uncontaminated by sin. The opposite of this uncontaminated condition is what the apostle James called "double-mindedness."

Double-Mindedness

Another way to think of double-mindedness is to regard a life of divided loyalties. James used the image of a person being "like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind."

Every once in a while we observe someone whose life is about one thing. That person has a singleness of purpose and focus that gives consistency to his or her choices and commitments.

Some public figures are so closely associated with a single-minded purpose — in image if not reality — that their names bring to mind one overriding word: Donald Trump (money), Napoleon (power), Hugh Hefner (lust), Imelda Marcos (shoes).

In the movie *City Slickers*, Billy Crystal plays a confused, dissatisfied thirty-something character with a vague sense that life is passing him by. Jack Palance — ancient, leathery, wise to the ways of the world ("a saddle bag with eyes") — asks Crystal if he would like to know the secret of life.

"The secret of life is pursuing one thing."

"It's this," Palance says, holding up a single finger.

"The secret of life is your finger?" asks Crystal.

“It’s one thing,” Palance replies. “The secret of life is pursuing one thing.”

Somehow this resonates deeply with Billy Crystal’s character. His life is scattered. He is torn between his obligation to his family and his desire for career advancement; between his need for security and his appetite for excitement. He is divided somehow. His life is about many things, and so, he senses, it is about nothing.

So what is that one thing? Jack Palance can’t tell Billy Crystal. “You have to find it for yourself.”

Søren Kierkegaard saw double-mindedness as the essential disease of the human spirit. His book *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing* is a reflection on a statement by James: “Purify your hearts, you double-minded.” The disease diagnosed by Kierkegaard is the failure to achieve simplicity — to have a life that is integrated, that is focused on one thing. It is the failure to make an ultimate commitment to what Kierkegaard calls “the Good” — what Jesus spoke of as “seeking first the kingdom.”

Multiplicity and Duplicity

The enemies of simplicity are multiplicity and duplicity. (The concepts, although not the terms, come from Clifford Williams’s book *Singleness of Heart*.) Multiplicity is a life marked by ambivalence — pulled and pushed. It is expressed in Augustine’s famous request, when he both longed for sexual purity and innocence and yet was not ready to change his lifestyle and feared losing pleasure: “Lord, give me chastity, but not yet.”

When we live a life of multiplicity, we both desire intimacy with God and flee from it. We long to be generous, but we also hoard and covet. We sometimes attempt to be servants and sometimes are driven by arrogance and self-serving. Even the apostle Paul faced this struggle: “I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”

Duplicity adds a note of falseness. In duplicity there is a discrepancy between the reasons we give for doing something and the *real* reasons why we are doing it. We gossip to tear someone down so we can feel superior, but we do it in the name of “praying more intelligently.” We say something that sounds humble, but secretly know that we are trying to impress people with our apparent humility. “Mendacity,” Big Daddy growls in the Tennessee Williams play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Everybody is filled with mendacity. Nobody is really what he or she seems to be.

A few years ago, a middle-aged man stood up as the Sunday morning worship service was coming to a close in a small church in the Pacific Northwest. This man, whom I have known all my life, was devoted to the church. He raised his family in it, taught Sunday school, served as a deacon, fixed coffee for the fellowship hour, and cleaned up afterward. As he stood there that Sunday, he began to weep. Between sobs he told the congregation, which had known him since he was a teenager, that he had sexually abused his children. It began when they were very young, and now they were almost all grown. When his wife found out, he moved out of the house and got into counseling. He was not sure what was going to happen. This man — a nice person to all who knew him — had to confess to his friends that he was a child molester.

Human beings have a remarkable capacity for self-deception.

All those years the man kept going to church, and all those years he kept violating his own children. He was a wave driven on the sea. Why? What did he think when he heard sermons, sang hymns, and taught Sunday school? What did he think when he looked into the eyes of his children?

The capacity of the human for duplicity is staggering. It usually takes different, much less dramatic forms than it did for this man, but the duplicity is there nonetheless.

Duplicity can be aimed at other people, but it can even be aimed at ourselves. Human beings have a remarkable capacity for self-deception.

Simplicity of Heart

The alternative to duplicity and to multiplicity is a life characterized by simplicity. Clifford Williams writes,

We possess singleness when we are not pulled in opposite directions and when we act without wanting something further for ourselves. Our inner drives do not conflict; they are aimed in one direction. The motives we appear to have are the ones we really have. Our inner focus is unified and our public posture corresponds with it. We are not, in short, divided.

Jesus could have used the words of Jack Palance. What he said was, “Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness.”

There is an echo of this thought in Jesus' words to a friend named Martha. This follower "was distracted by her many tasks" and resented her sister, Mary, who had chosen simply to sit in the presence of Jesus. "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing." The secret of life is — one thing.

There is unbelievable relief in being delivered from double-mindedness, in finally deciding on the focus of life. Going to a restaurant with a double-minded person can be torture: soup or salad, potatoes or rice, coffee or tea, cash or credit. Some of you reading these words wrestle with double-mindedness. And some of you can't make up your mind whether you have it or not!

Most of us know what it is to be a wave on the sea, to be pulled toward this life of Christ and yet held back by a secret sin we haven't been willing to renounce or get help for. We long to be servants but are unwilling to leave the comfort of the lounge chair. We'd like to be humble — but what if no one notices? So we go back and forth.

It is a miserable way to live, Jesus said. "The secret of life is pursuing one thing."

The Bible and Transformation

If we want to be saved from double-mindedness, we must "be transformed by the renewing of your minds." An indispensable practice is to have our minds re-formed by immersing them in Scripture. The psalmist writes of hiding God's Word in our hearts so that we might not sin. So how do we read the Bible in a way that will purify our hearts and help us live as Jesus would in our place? Let us start by looking at a metaphor from the Bible itself.

When Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus, telling the husbands to love their wives, he used this analogy: "... just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind — yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish."

We — the new community, the bride — are to be washed by "the Word." What does this mean?

Consider what happens when something doesn't get washed as it should. Two staff members at our church had been roommates in college, and back

then they had a contest to see who could go the longer without washing his sheets. One year later they decided to call it a draw. You can imagine the consequences.

By contrast, think of what happens when something *does* get washed. Soap and water move through the fibers of the dirty fabric at the deepest level, lifting out the impurities and removing them. Only after the washing can we see the fabric in the state for which it was originally designed. When we come to God, our minds and hearts are like that, cluttered with "false beliefs and attitudes, deadly feelings, misguided plans and hopes and fears."

I readily recall a few "deadly feelings" that I expressed in the course of a single day. Once when I was walking downtown, a street person was sitting where I wanted to walk and was holding a little sign asking for money. The thought ran through my mind, *He's dirty. I resent that he's here. Not only will I not give him money, but I won't make eye contact with him — I don't want to have to feel guilty. I want to keep my money.*

A little later, I made a purchase in a convenience store. I was in a hurry, and the line was not moving quickly enough to suit me. The man behind the counter spoke English with difficulty and was communicating slowly to the person at the head of the line. I thought, *Why can't they hire people who speak English? Just give me my change and let me get out of here.* Given these thoughts, I felt no love for this man. He was different from me — he was "other" — and I wished he weren't there.

Another moment with another person that same day produced another thought: *Here's an important person. Let me think what I might say that could get some good out of this person. How can I make a strategic connection?*

Heading back to my office, I walked through the church, but I had no keys with me and the door to the auditorium was locked, so I had to walk downstairs and back up. *That's so frustrating,* I whined to myself. *Look at all this time I have to waste now.* I could have had other thoughts: I could have been grateful that I have legs and am able to walk. I could have been speaking with God about my day. Instead, I was angry about a locked door and a flight of stairs.

There's more. As I was reading Scripture early in the morning, I gained an insight about the passage. My very next thought drifted to a staff meeting scheduled for later in the day: *I can tell them about this insight I've had. They will be impressed that I thought of it, particularly when they know it came out of this time that I have devoted to being with God. It may cause them to think*

of me as a spiritually advanced person. Of course, the thought wasn't articulated quite that clearly or brazenly even in my own mind. But that was the gist of my quick fantasy about how to use this moment as an exercise in impression management. Ironically, the "insight" involved the nature of humility.

Those experiences from one day are typical of the thoughts that inhabit my mind time after time. My mind is like — to use a wonderful image from Henri Nouwen — a banana tree filled with monkeys constantly jumping up and down. It is rarely still or quiet. All these thoughts, like so many chimps, clamor for attention: "How can I get ahead? Is someone trying to hurt me? How will I handle this problem?"

These thoughts are just a little soiled. I have some much darker thoughts that resemble big clods of dirt. The Desert Fathers had a word for them: *logismoi*. This Greek word refers to the false thoughts and desires that lead us to sin and despair. They are subtle and relentless. In an image less charming than Nouwen's monkeys, one ancient writer, John Climacus, compared the *logismoi* to maggot eggs that incubate in the soil of our fallenness.

One moment I want to hear from God; the next I want to use what I have heard to impress people with how spiritual I am.

What I lack is precisely "purity of heart." I do not will one thing. One moment I want to hear from God; the next I want to use what I have heard to impress people with how spiritual I am.

These *logismoi* are the infernal counterparts to Scripture. They equip us for bad works. They make corrupt words and actions inevitable. They also make it difficult for us to meditate or reflect on Scripture. Dietrich Bonhoeffer confessed,

Often we are so burdened and overwhelmed with other thoughts, images, and concerns that it may take a long time before God's Word has swept all else aside and come through. . . . This is the very reason why we begin our meditation with the prayer that God may send His Holy Spirit to us through His Word and reveal His Word to us and enlighten us.

A Cleansed Mind

It is a frightening thing to begin to see the truth about your own mind and its need for cleansing. This is why Martin Luther used to spend so much time in the confessional. He often spent several hours there for several days in a row. His fellow monks used to ask him what he was doing. (After all, he lived in a monastery. What did he have to confess: short-sheeting the other monks? chanting off-key?)

But Luther was frightened by his own cleverness at self-justification. He knew that the first commandment is to love God with heart, soul, body, and strength — and he couldn't even keep this injunction for five minutes.

Imagine having a mind cleansed of all the debris that blocks our best intentions. Imagine if each time you saw another person your first thought was to pray for him or bless her. Imagine what it would be like if, any time you were challenged or anxious, your reflexive response would be to turn to God for strength. Imagine, if you're a married man, that whenever you looked at any woman other than your wife you would see her as if she were your sister or your daughter. Imagine genuinely wishing your "enemies" well.

That's what it would be to have the mind "washed by the Word." This is what it means to "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." This is how we are to be transformed by Scripture. This is our great need.

So the Bible is to help us learn how to live in the kingdom of God here and now. It teaches us how to morph. It is indispensable for this task. I have never known someone leading a spiritually transformed life who had not been deeply saturated in Scripture.

The purpose of knowing Scripture is not to help us get a 100 score on the heavenly entrance exam. It is to help us become equipped for good works.

Paul writes about this role of Scripture in this famous statement: "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, *so that everyone who belongs to God might be proficient, equipped for every good work.*"

Paul does not say that the purpose of knowing Scripture is to enable us, when we go to heaven, to get a 100 score on the entrance exam. He says the

purpose is for us to become equipped for good works. Or, to put it another way, it is for us to become transformed into the kind of people from whom goodness flows like an unceasing stream of water.

Prepared for Good Works

How many good works will we be prepared for? Every one. We won't miss a trick. The idea is not that we will be trying to accumulate a vast assortment of "good deeds" each day, like some Boy Scout always on the lookout for a senior citizen to help across the street. It is that every moment of our lives will be an occasion for reflecting in external, visible ways the richness of the inner life shared between us and our Father.

If the Bible were to completely fulfill its mission, our minds would be so transformed — so filled with thoughts and feelings of truth, love, joy, and humility — that our lives would become one uninterrupted series of acts of grace and moral beauty. Every moment would be a miniature reflection of life in the kingdom of God.

So we need to develop the practice of meditating on the Scriptures. This is not quite the same thing as Bible study, although that is critically important, too. The purpose of meditation is to have our minds "washed by the Word." Here are some suggestions for the practice of meditating on Scripture.

1. Ask God to Meet You in Scripture

Before you begin reading, take a moment to ask God to speak to you. Then as you read, anticipate that he will do so.

Through the centuries Christians have told many stories of how they met God through the Bible. Augustine, in the best-known passage of his *Confessions*, tells of sitting under a fig tree and hearing a voice repeat, "Take it and read, take it and read." It seemed clear to him that this was the voice of God calling him to pick up the Bible. And when he had read a brief section from Paul's letter to the Romans, Augustine wrote, "I had no wish to read further; there was no need to. . . it was as though my heart was filled with a light of confidence and all the shadows of my doubt were swept away."

God still meets people in such ways. A friend of our family named Eileen was upset when her daughter told her that someone had been talking to her about God. Although she was disappointed with her life — trapped on her own suburban island — Eileen wanted nothing to do with God. That night Eileen

couldn't sleep. At midnight she went downstairs and picked up a Bible. She couldn't remember the last time she had been to a church; nor had she ever opened a Bible on her own. When she opened it now, she noticed it was divided into an "old" part and a "new" part. She decided to start with the "new" part, figuring the book may have been updated.

So in the still of the night she sat on her living room floor and began to read the gospel of Matthew. By 3 a.m. she was in the middle of John's gospel and found, as she puts it, that she had fallen in love with the character of Jesus. "I don't know what I'm doing," she prayed to God, "but I know you are what I want."

It is uniquely in the Bible that we encounter Jesus. The message of the Bible is not just that help is coming — it has arrived: "The kingdom of heaven is at hand," Jesus said. So before you begin to read, acknowledge that Jesus is present with you. Ask him to begin to wash your mind, your thoughts — even if the cleanser stings a bit.

As you read, certain ideas may strike you. You may be moved in reading about God's love, or feel convicted about some sin, or be prompted to take some course of action. Be open to the possibility that God really is speaking to you through his Word.

2. Read the Bible in a Repentant Spirit

Read the Bible with a readiness to surrender everything. Read it with a vulnerable heart. Read it wisely, but understand that reading for transformation is different from reading to find information or to prove a point. Resolve that you will be obedient to the Scriptures.

People who read the Bible in the wrong way, for the wrong reasons, can actually be damaged by their reading. Philipp Spener wrote wonderful advice about how *not* to read the Bible:

How may readers . . . do harm to themselves?

If . . . they read the Scriptures without sincere prayer and the purpose to obey God, but only to get knowledge, to make a show, and to exercise their curiosity upon them. . . .

If they do not observe what is useful for *their edification*, but only what they can use for *their glory and against others*. . . .

If they *despise* what the Scriptures simply stated and what is *easy to comprehend*. If, on the contrary, they take up only *difficult passages*, about which there is much dispute, in order

to discover in them something unusual and to make a show before others.

If they use what they have learned with *pride* and for *their own* glory.

If they *think they alone are wise*, obstinately refuse better instruction, love to quarrel, and receive nothing from others with modesty.

To be filled with knowledge about the Bible but to be unwashed by it is worse than not knowing it at all. One Sunday after church I was accosted by a man who was greatly admired for his knowledge of the Bible. He more or less appointed himself the watchdog of the church's doctrinal purity. It was a matter of deep importance to him that people know how well he knew the Scriptures. He loved to get into theological debates because they offered an opportunity to display his knowledge.

This man began to recite to me a long litany of complaints. He said he had been praying about them to the Lord, who agreed with him on so very many things: The young people in the church were not as devoted as they should be; the leaders of adult classes were not sufficiently in line with his favorite radio Bible teacher; he had seen little children (including mine) running irreverently in the sanctuary. And he wasn't too sure about my preaching either.

Read the Bible wisely, but understand that reading for transformation is different from reading to find information or to prove a point.

"Now remember," he said, as a final note, "I don't like a lot of what you do, but I love you in the Lord."

This man knew so very much about what the Bible said about love. The only thing he forgot was to practice it.

I began to reflect on this little biblical phrase — to love someone "in the Lord" — and it occurred to me how often we misuse it. "I don't like someone and I don't hope the best for them, but I'm a Christian, and of course, Christians love everyone, so this must be 'loving them in the Lord.'" The phrase becomes a way to spiritualize our lack of love. By contrast, loving someone "in the Lord" means to love them as the Lord himself would love them if he were in our place. Loving me "in the Lord" is precisely what this man didn't do.

It didn't take much reflection to realize the sad truth that I didn't love him, either. I didn't wish the best for him. I wanted to hear bad things about him. And the even more humbling truth is that the main reason I didn't love him is simply that he didn't like me. If he had had the same disposition but had been a fan of mine, I would have found myself prepared to overlook almost anything. I realized anew how much I need to be washed.

When a mind is washed — when someone begins to be filled with the very thoughts of God — it is a gift to the world. Some years ago when I was in Ethiopia, I learned about one such mind. It belonged to a ninety-nine-year-old woman who lived about two hours outside Addis Ababa, the capital city. This woman had become a follower of Christ in middle age, and she was both blind and illiterate. She lived in a little hut, where she kept two Bibles on her table — one in Amharic (the official language of Ethiopia), one in English. Whenever someone came to visit her, she would ask the person to read. Over time, her favorite passages became so familiar that she could recite them from memory, and if her visitors couldn't read, she would recite as a kind of gift to them.

People would come from far away just to visit her. Why would they make the journey for an elderly, illiterate, blind widow? Because somehow in her presence, through her voice, the words "The LORD is my shepherd" ceased to be just words. Those thoughts had washed over her mind so deeply, so often, that there was simply no way that anxiety-producing thoughts could survive. In purity of heart she willed one thing. People flocked to her because it was impossible to hear her say those words without being filled with the hope that perhaps one day they would be as real to them as they were to her.

When it comes to reading Scripture, the key question is not "how much," but "how."

Why did reading the Bible have such a different effect on this Ethiopian woman than it did on the man in my church? It is because, when it comes to reading Scripture, the key question is not "how much," but "how."

It is possible to read Scripture without being "washed by the Word." Scripture itself speaks of just such a condition. Jesus addressed religious leaders who prided themselves on how well they knew the sacred writings. "You search the Scriptures," Jesus said, "because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come

to me to have life.” The religious leaders thought their great knowledge of Scripture was proof of their spiritual greatness. But they never allowed the Bible’s teachings on humility to cleanse their mind of pride, never allowed its teachings on love to purge their judgmentalism, so they did not recognize the truth of Jesus’ teaching.

3. Meditate on a Fairly Brief Passage or Narrative

It is important to be familiar with all of the Bible. In times of study we will need to read broadly and cover a great deal of material. But in reading for transformation we have to go slowly.

Madame Guyon wrote,

If you read quickly, it will benefit you little. You will be like a bee that merely skims the surface of a flower. Instead, in this new way of reading with prayer, you must become as the bee who penetrates into the depths of the flower. You plunge deeply within to remove its deepest nectar.

So immerse yourself in a short passage of Scripture — perhaps a few verses. Read it slowly. Read it the way you would read a love letter at the height of romance. Certain words may stand out to you; allow them to sink into your heart. Ask if perhaps God wants to speak to you through these words. The question that always lies behind such reading is, “God, what do you want to say to me in this moment?”

The goal is not for us to get through the Scriptures. The goal is to get the Scriptures through us.

If you are reading a story in Scripture, you may want to use your imagination to try to recapture the setting and what was happening in the text. What do the arms of the aging father feel like as they wrap around his prodigal son? How do the fish and bread taste that Jesus multiplied to feed the five thousand?

If you are like me, this kind of reading means that you will have to adjust your attitude. Success is not measured by the number of pages read. Sometime ago I set a goal of praying through the psalms, one psalm a day. This is an ancient practice because the psalms have traditionally been the great prayer book of the people of God. They cover the whole range of the human

heart’s expression toward God: awestruck praise, bitter complaint, soul-rattling confusion, exuberant gratitude.

But a strange thing happened. I found that my goal became to get through the psalms. Each day that I did one, I could chalk it off my list, for I was one step closer to the goal. This meant, of course, that I never wanted to get stuck on one psalm two days in a row — that would keep me from my goal.

It was as if in my mind God had a great big Behavior Modification chart on the refrigerator of heaven, and each time I made it through a psalm I got a gold star. Naturally, this utterly sabotaged God’s real purpose in giving the psalms in the first place. God wants to speak to us, to renew us. And if he is using one psalm, or even one word, to do this, our job is to stick with it as long as it takes to learn what we need to learn.

The goal is not for us to get through the Scriptures. The goal is to get the Scriptures through us.

Some churches give people the idea that the only way to transformation is knowledge. There is an assumption that as people’s knowledge of the Bible rises, their level of spiritual maturity rises with it.

A friend who had just started attending church asked a wonderful question about the role of knowledge in spiritual transformation. “Now, as I understand it, one reason people devote so much time to listening to preaching and teaching is to be able to understand the Bible better, right?” he asked.

“That’s right.” “And the reason for people to be able to understand the Bible better is . . . ?”

We don’t have to reflect on his question very long to see the implications. Take any person you know whose knowledge of the Bible is, say, ten times greater than that of the average unchurched person. Then ask yourself if this person is ten times more loving, ten times more patient, and ten times more joyful than the average unchurched person.

Knowledge about the Bible is an indispensable good. But knowledge does not *by itself* lead to spiritual transformation. When Paul urged the Christians at Rome to “be transformed by the renewing of your minds,” he was thinking of far more than just the acquisition of information. “Mind” refers to a whole range of perceiving, understanding, valuing, and feeling that in turn determines the way we live. (Calvin commented on this verse: “It means that we will think, speak, meditate, and do all things with a view to God’s glory.”) This renewal will only take place when we, to echo Paul’s words, “present our

bodies as living sacrifices” — as we arrange our lives around those practices, relationships, and experiences through which God produces transformation.

Both human experience and the Bible teach that increased knowledge — even knowledge of the Scriptures — does not automatically produce transformed people.

Moreover, while knowledge is vital and should be prized, it also poses some dangers. It often demolishes humility. The sobriquet “know-it-all” is never used as a compliment. The Bible itself contains some warnings: “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.”

Both human experience and the Bible teach that increased knowledge — even knowledge of the Scriptures — does not automatically produce transformed people.

4. Take One Thought or Verse with You Through the Day

The psalmist says that fruitful living comes to the person who meditates on the law “day and night.” That appears to cover every part of the day.

We can’t meditate fast. The idea of meditation comes from an era less frenzied than ours. There were no “Evelyn Wood courses in speed-meditation” in the psalmist’s day: “I can meditate at 700 words a minute with a 90 percent comprehension rate.”

Meditation is as slow as the process by which the roots draw moisture from the flowing river to bring nurture and fruitfulness to a great tree. Meditation is important enough to be mentioned more than fifty times in the Old Testament. It means not only to think about God’s Word, but also to read it aloud. Reading the Scriptures out loud gives the reader focused attention and the advantage of learning by both eye and ear. Meditation is likened in Scripture to a young lion growling over its prey, or the low murmur of a dove, or a cow chewing its cud.

Meditation is not meant to be esoteric or spooky or reserved for gurus reciting mantras in the lotus position. It merely implies sustained attention. It is built around this simple principle: *“What the mind repeats, it retains.”*

To begin, choose a single piece of Scripture — one “thought” of God’s — that you will live with for one day. Select this verse or phrase before you go to sleep at night or as soon as you wake up in the morning.

Take, for example, this thought from Psalm 46:10: “Be still, and know that I am God!” For one day, live with these words. Let your mind continually return to them in secret:

“Today, as best I can, I am going to be still. I am not going to chatter thoughtlessly. I will remember that I don’t have to defend myself or make sure people think of me the way I want them to. Today I don’t have to get my way. Today, before I make decisions, I will try to listen for God’s voice. Today I am not going to be tossed around by anxiety or anger — I will take those feelings as prompts from the Spirit to listen first. In each of these situations I will ask God, ‘How would you like me to respond?’ I will live in stillness.”

Do you know what it is like to be still? Do you know how others in your life might love it if you were still, just for a day?

As you do this, a wonderful thing will happen. You will discover that you really do *want* to be still. You will really *want* to know that the Lord is God.

5. Allow This Thought to Become Part of Your Memory

Memorizing Scripture is one of the most powerful means of transforming our minds. “I have hidden your word in my heart,” the psalmist wrote, “that I might not sin against you.”

Memorize statements from Scripture that will help you in matters in which you need it most. For instance, if you wrestle with fear, you may want to memorize Psalm 27:1: “The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?” If pride is a problem, try Philippians 2:3: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.”

And if you are concerned that you have a memory like a steel sieve, don’t be. What matters is not how many words we memorize, but what happens to our minds as we immerse them in Scripture. As with any other “spiritual discipline,” memorization is only a means to an end.

One of my earliest memories of church involves a contest to see who could memorize the most Bible verses. We each had a poster on the wall with our name on it. The poster had a picture of a mansion, and every verse memorized meant a sticker — a little room to add on to our mansion. Whoever got the most rooms in his or her mansion won a prize: A white Bible — with our name printed on the cover — in gold.

Eventually the contest narrowed down to me and another kid — a freckle-faced, dark-haired little girl with great big glasses, who was named Louise. For weeks it was nip and tuck, until the last month when she began to pull away. In the last week it was clear she would win.

What matters is not how many words we memorize, but what happens to our minds as we immerse them in Scripture.

I began to wonder: What could I do about Louise?

So I killed her.

At least, in my mind I did. I did not like her. I would have done almost anything to hear my name called as the winner and get that Bible. Church was becoming a place where I could shine and prove how good and smart I was. So I did not rejoice when Louise's name was called.

That wasn't the only time I have turned church into a contest. Sometimes I still act as if I'm trying to earn a big white Bible.

To memorize Scripture — to "hide it in our hearts" — can be a great help, but only if it serves the divine purpose: "that I might not sin against you."

Be a "Person of One Book"

If you were marooned on a desert island and could have only a single book with you, what would you choose?

Somebody once asked this question of G. K. Chesterton. Given his reputation as one of the most erudite and creative Christian writers in the first half of the twentieth century, one would naturally expect his response to be the Bible. It was not. Chesterton chose *Thomas' Guide to Practical Ship-building*.

That makes sense, of course. When we're trapped on an island, we want a book that will help us get home. We don't want to be entertained or even informed. We want a book that will show us how to be saved.

The truth is that we *are* trapped — trapped in patterns of thought and behavior that lead to death. Chesterton himself once said that the doctrine of the Fall is the one Christian belief that is empirically verifiable. We are all trapped, as Eugene Peterson put it, on an "I-land," where we know neither ourselves nor God and are looking for a message that help is on the way.

So the followers of Christ have historically sought to be a people devoted to the Word. John Wesley said that a pivotal moment of his life came when he prayed to become a "*homo unius libri*, 'a man of one book.'"

Let us not forget that "the secret of life is pursuing one thing." And as Kierkegaard said, "Purity of heart is to will one thing." The words that bombard us all day long from billboards and tabloids and talk shows pull us in a thousand directions. But the word God speaks to us from his Word can renew our minds. As he said to Augustine, so God says still: "Take it and read. Take it and read."