



Gospel / Life

Toward A Spirituality Of Freedom

New Creation Teaching Ministry: Tuesday Night Studies 2011, Seacliff Anglican Church

Study 30: The Gift Of Meditating

Listening to God our Father is the most deeply normal thing for those who have been created in His image, and yet it is the most difficult thing for those who have rebelled against Him. Because we are human, we are made to hear Him; because we are sinners we have all kinds of barriers against that. For those of us who are in Jesus Christ, who have come to know the freedom that his salvation brings, this problem is largely but not completely overcome. God has dug ears for us through our deafness; but the presence of sin in us may drown out His voice.

The gift of meditating is essentially the gift of listening to His Word, and it is exactly this: a gift from Him. We pray for the Holy Spirit and He answers by directing us to His Word. The Spirit enables us to hear, and the Word is the means by which the Father refreshes and renews us with the Holy Spirit.

Meditation in itself is not difficult. Truth is, we are natural born and spontaneous meditators. In itself meditation is not even a “spiritual activity”—it is just something that we automatically do, every day. Ask any person who has driven across town to visit you if they remember any of the stops, the lights, and the traffic conditions on the way. It is rather frightening when we realise that we seem to be oblivious to these most important things! What has happened is that our minds have been in a meditative state. We haven’t been actively *thinking thoughts* but rather thoughts have come and occupied our minds, taking hold of us imaginatively or emotionally and leading us on a mental journey.¹ The conscious decisions we’ve needed to make (brake, turn, speed up) have actually become unconscious while we have daydreamed. There are many other forms of spontaneous meditation—worrying, singing to ourselves, watching an ad on TV, etc...

Meditation is quite different to our normal way of thinking. When we meditate, we do not just think deeply about someone or reflect persistently on something. Meditation involves our entire being. It has to do with the centre of our being, the heart with all its thoughts, feelings, passions and desires. Our passions and desires often determine the spontaneous meditation of our heart. We meditate quite naturally and effortlessly on what we desire, what we enjoy, and what we love... Martin Luther therefore rightly observes: “For what we want and love, on that we reflect inwardly and diligently.... Therefore let delight [desire] be first sent into the heart as the root, and then meditation will come of its own accord.”²

What is difficult is the most important meditation, that of hearing and dwelling on God’s word. It is most difficult because of the difficulty of loving God. Right at the heart of a life of godly meditation then is ongoing reception and assurance of the love of God for the meditator, which elicits and prompts the reflective meditation on Him.

¹ John Kleinig, *Grace Upon Grace* (Concordia: St. Louis, 2008), p. 90

² *ibid*, p. 93

Christian Meditation

In Luke 10:38-42, the story of Mary and Martha we have teaching of all the elements of Christian meditation. Mary is the model of the meditator. She welcomed Jesus, sat at his feet and listened to his word. “Her eyes were fixed on Jesus, her ears were attentive to Him; she was open and receptive to Him. Nothing distracted her from Jesus and what He had to say.”³ Martha also was engaged in meditation she stewed on the injustice of her sister’s *perceived* laziness and the Lord’s *perceived* lack of care. The more she meditated on this, the more clear it seemed to her, and the angrier she became. Her meditation convinced of something that was not true. She had lost focus on the grace of the Lord Jesus. Her cooking could have been as fruitfully meditative as Mary’s sitting listening.

The first and most important truth that undergirds meditation is that Jesus is himself present with his people. When we meditate on Jesus, we are attending him who is invisibly present with us by the Spirit of God.

Secondly, we encounter Christ Jesus not through abstract process of thought or imagination but through his Word. We cannot get at God directly, but must always meet Him as He comes to us, in Jesus Christ. And we cannot get at Christ except through his word. He is meeting us in that word. By that word Jesus the Lord is active among us, working His grace and salvation in fresh and new ways. His word, spoke by him not just in the past but again and freshly through the Scriptures, is spirit and life.

Thirdly God our Father has justified by grace through our faith in Jesus Christ. It is knowing this that enables meditation on God’s word. Those who lack assurance of salvation find it hard to approach God’s word for they fear that all they will find there is condemnation. It reveals their guilt and makes them try to justify themselves before God. This is a very dangerous way to read the Bible!—it can lead either to despair about God, or presumption towards Him! Either way, there is no love of God that grows and deepens through it. However for the justified, the Word of God is delight for in it God our Father speaks to us again, and again, of His loving gift of His Son for us. The Word is loved because it has brought us to know the love of God, and enables us to grow in that love.

When we meditate on Scripture, we are to do so *evangelically*—i.e. foremost as the preaching of good news to us, rather than the demand for obedience. Luther had helpful advice on meditating on God’s word:

When you open the book containing the gospels and read or hear how Christ comes here or there, or how someone is brought to him, you should therein perceive the sermon or the gospel through which he is coming to you, or you are being brought to him. For the preaching of the gospel is nothing else than Christ coming to us, or we being brought to him. When you see how he works, however, and how he helps everyone to whom he comes or who is brought to him, then rest assured that faith is accomplishing this in you and that he is offering your soul exactly the same sort of help and favour through the gospel. If you pause here and let him do you good, that is, if you believe that he benefits and helps you, then you really have it. Then Christ is yours, presented to you as a gift.

It is only when the word has been received as this free and gracious gospel that we can possibly begin to think about obedience, for then obedience’s other name is love. The obedience is actually grounded in the reception of grace and the Holy Spirit that are granted to us through the word of God.

³ *ibid*, p. 96

The Practice of Feeding on the Word

We receive the Word that God implants in our souls by meditating on it. And that is really quite a simple business. We, in fact, do not need to do anything except take a break and rest for a while in God's presence. As we meditate, we keep the Third Commandment, which tells us to do nothing in order to let God speak to us personally and do His work in us, the commandment that urges us not to despise preaching and God's Word but to hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it. That rest for meditation is best taken as part of our weekly and daily routine.⁴

A weekly way of meditating fruitfully on God's word, to receive anew the grace of the Lord Jesus, is to attend divine service (where God serves us), receive holy communion and hear the Scriptures read, recite Scripture in various parts of the service (hymns and responses) and listen to preaching.

This really is a meditative process. It requires little of us in time effort and ability. God Himself provides for us. We can go to church and relax in the presence of God, expecting that we will find His mercy coming to us anew in our time there. Any part of the church service might trigger a meditation in us. We sometimes chastise ourselves because our minds "wander" during a service. Rather than demanding we be mentally concentrated for the whole service, we should recognise that perhaps the Spirit is speaking to us through the words of the service.

Since the whole of the Divine Service enacts the Word of God, any part of it may trigger a train of meditation in us, whether it is the confession of sins or the hymn, the reading from the Scriptures or the blessings that are spoken to us. Yet we are most likely to enter a state of meditation during the sermon as we relax physically and listen to what is said. That's where we can expect the Holy Spirit to preach to us and stimulate us to meditate. Hence it is common for pastors to introduce their sermon with the prayer that is derived from Psalm 19:14: "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Not all sideways thoughts, drifts in focus in the service are distractions! They may be the work of the Holy Spirit in us. These private meditations will be deeply connected to the word of God through the Scriptures and the preacher, but their connections may not be immediately obvious. In most cases though there will be a close coincidence. (This is not excusing inattention to the sermon. True meditation flows out of attentiveness, openness to the word of God. Inattention to the preaching may indicate a perverse meditation on something other than the word of God—anger, bitterness, some idol...)

Daily meditation on God's Word is learned through practice. It is best to follow a simple and flexible procedure. Call on the Triune God in prayer and ask for the gift and guiding of the Holy Spirit. Relax and be sure that you know that this meditating is not in any way contributing to your standing with God: his favour is fully upon you. If you are tense, anxious, or upset, acknowledge that as you ask God for the help of the Holy Spirit. As you relax, all kinds of thoughts and concerns will crowd in. Don't fight them or censor them: that allows them to claim your attention. Gradually your mind stops racing about: when the stillness comes, focus again on the Father's presence and grace, and simply adopt a hearing attitude: "Speak Lord, for your servant listens."

Then open up the Scriptures. Not randomly. Have some kind of plan or order to your approach to the Scriptures. You may be reading through the whole bible. You may be taking time to meditate on the readings for the coming, or previous, Sunday service. It is good to read slowly and as attentively as you can. Move your lips over the words: it helps the mind to focus. When something strikes you, in the conscience, stop and dwell on it, letting it speak to you. Don't worry if you don't complete the set reading.

⁴ *ibid*, p. 119

Ask questions of the text and of God. What does this reading tell you about Jesus Christ and of God's saving grace in him? What was in the text that surprised me; what was not in it that I thought might be? Can I imagine the scene? Have I understood the logic of this passage? How does this passage affect me emotionally? Does this passage force anybody or any situation in my life into my mind, and if so what is Jesus saying about it?

Take the things that you have been reading and hearing and turn them into prayer. Thank God for what He has shown you of His action for you in Jesus Christ. Confess anything of sinfulness that this passage has brought to mind. Pray for the needs of others as this passage has highlighted that. Adore God for what this passage has revealed of His character. Pray as you are prompted by the passage.

The purpose in all this is to receive God's help in briefing and equipping you for the day and the days that lie ahead, so that you may live in His presence and orient the whole day around Him.