

Walking with God through his Word

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[0 : 00] This is from Matthew chapter 7, starting at verse 15. Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.

By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.

A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

Many will say to me on that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons? And in your name perform many miracles? And I will tell them plainly, I never knew you.

[1 : 03] Away from me, you evildoers. Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who builds his house on the rock.

The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on the sand.

The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash. When Jesus had finished these sayings, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority and not as their teachers of the law.

I want to talk with you a little bit about just what we were reading, Anna Longred, from Matthew 7. Jesus, at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, which is a really profound bit of ethical teaching, he says this at the end of that sermon, Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

The rain came down, the streams rose, the winds blew and beat against that house, it fell with a great crash. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who's building his house on the sand.

[2 : 35] The rain came down, the streams rose, the winds blew and beat against that house, it fell with a great crash. So I want to think about what it means to really walk with God and his word and build our lives on that kind of foundation of truth that we find in the teaching of Jesus and in the Bible.

So every day has a liturgy. What, you see, is a liturgy? Well, a liturgy is a ritual of worship.

It's the acts of worship that we perform each day. The acts of worship, the rituals of worship, the routines that shape our lives.

A set of practices and actions that shape our attention and our devotion. I gave you all a quote last year from a poet called Mary Oliver who says that attention is the beginning of devotion.

And so our habits force our attention in certain directions and the things that we pay attention to are the things that capture our devotion.

[3 : 48] So what are the habits, the routines and the rituals that are shaping your life, your day? What is capturing your attention and thus your devotion?

Well, here's a pretty common picture, isn't it? We wake up, our phone wakes us up, the alarm, and we grab our phone. We check it.

We look for messages. We go into social media and we look at the news. And after 10 minutes of that, our head's already at a muddle.

Is JK Rowling a bigot or is she not? And then we log into our emails and we see all the work that's waiting for us through the rest of the day. And then we crawl out of bed.

We have something to eat. We might exercise. We go to work. We plow through the day. We binge on TV in the evenings and then we crawl back into bed.

[4 : 45] And then we hit repeat for the next day and the next day. And in that process, our attention is captured by the noise of public outrage or by the demands of our work or the needs of our family.

But if we want to walk with Jesus, what kind of liturgy do we need? How do we pay attention to Jesus so that he's going to have our devotion?

What habits do we need if the loudest voice in our lives is the voice of love, the voice of God's love through his son, Jesus Christ, crucified and risen?

If we want to hear what Jesus is saying, if we want to hear words of love and hope and life, then we need to let his word, the Bible, into our lives.

So we need a liturgy of life that involves God's word every day. Now, I quite often just promote some books to you.

[5 : 52] So here's a book that I have been pointing you towards and try to push you in the direction of this book over the last few months. It's called *The Common Rule, Habits of Purpose for an Age of Distraction* by Justin Whitmell Early.

And one of the daily habits that he really endorses for us is what he calls Bible before phone.

Bible before phone. Before you go into your phone and look at social media or the news or your email and messages, first of all, go to the Bible. Actually, you know, get one of these Bibles.

Don't just read the Bible on your phone because that means you're getting distracted, but get a real solid, fleshy paper Bible. And then you don't need to have your phone in your hand all the time.

I'm going to come back to this later, but that's where we're going. We want to walk with God. And if we want to walk with God, we need to walk in his word.

[6 : 55] So through lockdown, Louise and I have been getting up every morning. Honest, we have. And most days, the first thing we do is head out the door for a walk. And that's been great.

It's the same walk every day. We go along Hermitage Drive, through the paddock and up Blackford Hill. And as we walk side by side, we're observing what's around us.

We're remarking on things that we see. And we're remembering stuff that's happened. And we're discussing what's going on in the world. We're deciding what we're going to do. We're looking backwards, looking forwards, thinking about the presence.

We look at the foxgloves growing in the hill or smell the coconut fragrance of the bloom. We look over the city from the top of the hill. And we talk about the past, the future, the day, the challenges to come.

Then we get home. We eat a breakfast together. We read the Bible and we pray. And that's our liturgy to snow for the morning.

[7 : 56] It's our habit, our routine. And it helps shape the day in a really good way for us. And it's such a privilege to be able to walk with friends and family and church community in life.

But the most important person to walk with is the living God. What's it like to walk side by side, immersed in his story? What's it like to have your existence woven together with the life of God so that you and he are inseparable and the very best of friends?

Because I've got really good news for you this morning. You were made to live in God's presence. You are a remarkable human being who was made to walk with God.

He wants you to walk with him. He wants to go side by side with you in life. That's the story of the Bible. That's the invitation that God's putting in front of you.

And if we're going to have that daily walk with God, that life that mingles with his, that we are in his presence, in his company, part of his story, then we need the liturgy of life.

[9 : 05] Last week, David spoke about the liturgy of prayer. We need the habits of prayer in our life. Today, we're looking at the habits of the Bible. In a couple of weeks, we're going to look at the habit of generosity and then the habit of rest or Sabbath.

So Thursday thought, what do I want you to remember on Thursday when you get out of bed? As you look back on what Neil said, this is it.

In the morning, read your Bible before you check your phone. Okay? In the morning, read your Bible before you check your phone. That's your Thursday thought. But I think about the rock of God's word, how we build our life on that rock, and then what happens when you're building your life on sand.

So that contrast between the rock of God's word, building your life on that rock, or else building your life on sand. So the rock of God's word. As Christians, we're really convinced that the Bible is true. That it has a self-authenticating reality and truthfulness. The Apostle Paul, all scripture is God-breathed. It's inspired by him.

[10 : 22] God's word, according to the book of Psalms and Psalm 18, God's word is flawless. The Bible is God's word, and it's eternal truth, rather than just truth for a time.

So we can trust what the Bible says and what Jesus says as enduring truth. That means we have to hear what it's saying. People in Galilee were on a mountainside listening to Jesus preaching in the Sermon on the Mount.

And they've heard some remarkable teaching from Jesus. And now at the end, Jesus has cherished them saying, what are you going to do with my words? Are you going to leave them or are you going to live them?

What are we doing with the words of Jesus? Are we leaving them to one side? Or are we living them out as we walk with Jesus hand in hand in life?

So Jesus gives the story of the two men who build two very similar looking houses. So if you're standing out in your street on Morningside or Brunfield or wherever you are, looking at the two houses, they would look the same externally.

[11 : 32] You wouldn't be able to tell the difference until the storm came. And then once the storm comes and the wind and the rain and the floods come along, one house stands strong and that's a house with deep foundations.

But another house collapses. That's the house without the strong foundation in God's word. So we're in a time of upheaval, coronavirus.

Followed by economic devastation for lots of people. And then a time of social unrest and protests against racism and police brutality.

And some of us feel our world is collapsing and some of us feel our house is standing strong. And that difference comes from being rooted in something that's eternal and true, rather than something that's shallow and superficial.

Jesus has challenged us about our lives and the superficiality of what we think and believe, that we've not really examined how we live carefully enough.

[12 : 45] And that often, even for religious people and Christians, our response to the Bible is superficial and shallow. And we're not really being shaped by God's word and God's presence in our lives through his word.

I really want to say to you, as we look at Black Lives Matters and protests about racial injustice, go and read the Sermon on the Mount.

It is a manifesto for our time. It calls us to disown greed and materialism and embrace generosity. It teaches us to value every life from womb to tomb.

It teaches us sexual purity, not just with our bodies, but in mind and heart. It teaches us to love our enemies. It teaches us to repudiate hypocrisy and demonstrations of our own righteousness, but to embrace prayer, fasting and fellowship with our Father in heaven.

The Sermon on the Mount teaches us to be humble, merciful, pure revolutionaries, the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

[14 : 01] There is great teaching in God's word that changes us. But it's not just reading the Bible that changes us. It's meeting with the God of the Bible who speaks to us in his word.

And so that's the next thing I want to go on and look at. It's not just that God's word is a rock of great teaching for us, but as we read the Bible, how do we build our life on this rock?

And I want to say two things about that. First, get to know the story and then get to know the Savior. So, you know, you've got a Bible, but you don't know what to do with it. It looks really long.

It's quite complicated, apparently, in places. You don't know where to start. So what do you do with it? And I want to say, you know, have a look at the whole Bible to get the whole picture.

Reading big chunks of the Bible just in the odd verse here and there is really helpful. The Bible can be challenging because it's a big book. It's a long book. It's got lots of different parts to it.

[15 : 06] And so sometimes we think, oh, it's really hard to understand the Bible. But that's not true. The Bible at most levels is actually pretty straightforward.

It is one story told through different authors at different times. The story starts at the beginning with creation and then our alienation from God through sin.

Then it moves on to God's plan of salvation and redemption, which reaches its climax in Jesus Christ. And then from Jesus, it moves forward to look at how God is going to redeem and restore his people and his creation.

So there are kind of four movements in the story of the Bible from beginning to end. Creation, fall, redemption, restoration. Creation, and that's the story of what God is doing in history.

So bits of the Bible that seem quite obscure to us actually begin to make good sense once we lock them into that bigger overarching narrative. It gives them context.

[16:15] So think of the Bible as a story of God's rescue and suddenly it will make a lot more sense to you. It's not a moralistic book about how to be a good person. It's a book about the Savior Jesus and how he rescues all kinds of messy people.

So you need to know the story. Read the Bible to know this big story that we live in and inhabit. But I also want to say know the Savior.

The story is not just information. It's redemption. And we're not redeemed by knowledge. We're redeemed by Jesus, the Savior. So God doesn't want you just to know about him, but to know him personally, deeply, really, so that you are walking with him as your best friend, living in his presence.

As you walk in his word, you will meet with the God of the word in a real, living, personal way. The Bible, we're told, is like a tree planted by a river and life flows from it.

And in its truth, in the word of God, we begin to flourish because we meet with God in his word. Without God, we will wither. There's an incredible life on offer here.

[17:36] Just stop and think about that for one second. That God says you can meet him and know him in his word. And that when you do that, you'll have a sense of his presence and you'll be changed.

You'll flourish. Because you'll understand that God's love is better than life itself. You'll understand that God has loved you so deeply that he has sent his son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross for your sin and your salvation.

And that story is what will change you. You'll find life, salvation, forgiveness, and freedom from shame.

And then you'll be free to love your enemies and bless those who hate you. So as God comes to us in his words, I want you to really learn to linger in the Bible.

Linger in the word. Read it meditatively. Think through it carefully. So you want to read big chunks, but you also want to read smaller bits and read them more slowly. Slow down.

[18:41] Read the Bible aloud to yourself. Read it through a few times. A psalm, a prayer, a story, a parable from the Gospels. The story of the cross and the crucifixion.

If you're not a Christian, go and read the story of the crucifixion aloud over a few times to yourself. Let all the meaning of it, the richness of it, the implications of it sink in so that they go from your mind and an intellectual sort of endeavor into your heart.

Into something that moves how you feel about the world and what you want and shapes you and draws you to God. As we read the Bible and different parts of the Bible, we're always asking, our brain is engaged.

It's not a superstitious act. We're trying to think it through. What did the author intend to say? What did the author intend to say? How does this part of the story connect to the bigger story of the Bible of grace and salvation?

Get these questions clear first. Otherwise, you're just kind of, you know, reading the Bible as if it's a kind of lucky dip. Is there some good nugget for me today that will cheer me up?

[19:56] We want to know what God is actually saying in the Bible. And as we do that, we want to take it deeply into our lives as a tree planted by the river drinks the water deep into its roots.

We want to make what we read part of us. Feel its weight. Feel its power. Feel its life. Feel its love. We want to drink it in so it's going to strengthen us, guide us, refresh us, feed us, nourish us with love and goodness and hope.

Take truth from head to heart so our hearts are set on fire with love of God and love of each other. And that takes time and it takes concentration and it takes effort.

Tim Keller has written a really useful book called Prayer. And later on, experiencing awe and intimacy with God, later on in the book, he talks about how do we read the Bible in this way?

And he's just saying, you know, ask, what does it teach me about God? So ask questions as you read. What am I learning about God? What am I learning about human nature?

[21 : 01] What am I learning about Christ and his salvation? What am I learning about my life and how to love God and neighbor? So I want to say the Bible is a rock to build your life on.

Secondly, read the Bible carefully to get the big story, but also to get the Savior. Get Jesus. Get saved.

That's what it's all for in the end, so that you will be saved. So let me just go finally to this idea of are you building your life in sand? After the Enlightenment, secularists took the Bible's framework of life, that linear narrative of progress from beginning of the world moving forward, a story of progress culminating in the new creation, a world without need, want, sorrow or sin.

But what they did with that narrative is they removed God from it and said that we can make this leap forward.

We can make this progress without God. We can do it in our own strength, by our own efforts. And that myth on which we may be building our own lives, or that myth that our culture leans on to build, it's sand, isn't it?

[22 : 28] It's not got depth to it. Another book, Reappearing Church by Mark Sayers, if you can see it there. Mark Sayers says this. He says, the secular myth of progress mirrors the Christian map of reality.

The secular myth of progress mirrors the Christian map of reality. But it replaces faith in God with faith in ourselves. It depends on the myth of human perfectibility, that we can gain perfection by our own effort.

This secular myth, which is held to by people on the left and the right, it seeks the fruit of God's kingdom, peace, justice, prosperity, redemption, but it wants the fruit of the kingdom without the king.

It's the idea that it's our progress, our efforts that will make the world flourish. Whereas Christianity is saying, no, we can't do that on our own. It's God's presence that will make the world flourish.

The secular myth of progress really is flawed and hopeless. As we see the gap between that myth and what it promises to us and the reality of the world we live in, and as we have to bear the pressure of being the saviors of the world, then we're overwhelmed with anxiety, panic, and fear.

[23 : 59] The world isn't turning out the way we thought it would. Our lives aren't turning out the way we thought it would. And we're thrown into crisis because we don't feel that we can do all that is being asked of us to make this world a better place.

We're told we need to rescue this world, but we can't. We need to rescue ourselves, but we can't. Because we can't do it without God. We need his presence, his life-giving, saving presence, his truth, his grace, his power, his salvation.

So many of us, even the religious among us, we are building our truth, not our lives, not in the truth of God's word, but on the sand. We're trusting not what God has done, but what we can do.

The power to change my life, the power for change to come through me into the lives of others, doesn't lie in me, but in Jesus and the cross.

So I want to say, go there today. Go to the Lord Jesus Christ. Go to the cross to find hope for yourself and hope for the world. So please, walk with God in his word, in his truth, so that you will flourish in hard times.

[25 : 17] Pick up your Bible before you pick up your phone. Hear what God has to say before you hear what social media has to say. The guy who wrote this book, Justin, he wrote it because he was a corporate lawyer in Washington, D.C., but he worked with a team who were in London.

So he was working with a team of corporate lawyers in London. And when he got up in the morning, they'd already been at work for five hours. And so they had five hours of filling his inbox with emails. And so he woke up, looked at his emails, and immediately he's straight into work mode. And he feels he's got so much to do in order to justify his existence.

So much work to do to justify his being here. And we all feel like Justin, I think, that we have to justify our presence in this world by hard work or by being great parents or being amazing homeschoolers or by doing our very best at life.

That is a story built on sand. If we wake up thinking about work or family, if we go to sleep thinking about work or family, that's our liturgy.

[26 : 29] It's what has our attention and devotion. It's what we worship. So Justin decided, I'm not going to wake up thinking about work and go to sleep thinking about work. I'm going to change the liturgy.

God's word will come first and last in my day. Because what God's word says is this, you don't have to justify your existence by your hard work or by your goodness as a parent or a homeschooler or whatever kind of thing it is.

You don't have to justify your existence in this world because you are accepted as you are. You are justified through faith in Jesus Christ. It's him that makes your life right. You are accepted as you are and loved as you are by Jesus Christ.

I'm going to finish there. Just let me say a very short prayer. Fergus will sing, say the benediction and then short Q&A; with Louise. So just let me pray.

Father in heaven, please help us not to build our life on the sand. Help us to hear the truth of what you say and to come to know you through that same truth so that we will walk with you in life and have a firm foundation.

[27 : 40] Amen.