Recently, my pastor preached a series on Spiritual Disciplines. If you’ve never heard the term, you may ask what is a Spiritual Discipline? Lists of these vary, but typically include worship, prayer, fasting, Sabbath rest and others. There are books published on the subject, and my short treatment won’t match these more eloquent and comprehensive works, but I would like to discuss the one discipline that my pastor asked me to preach on. Bible Study.

Usually, lists of spiritual disciplines include Bible reading. I’m all for Bible reading. The Word of God has supernatural power – but do you understand what you read, are you drawn closer to God, and is your life any different? I think many of us have discovered we get a lot more out of our Bible reading if we read with a purpose, if we read with a plan, if we read with tools it help us comprehend what God has laid out for us.

Too often I talk to people who are more than willing to read their Bibles, and even resolve to read through their Bibles. They start, and then that effort stumbles, then stops. Somewhere along the way, it becomes a chore, an obligation that isn’t enjoyed, but endured. Discipline may carry them through to completion, but what has been missed along the way? What opportunities for spiritual growth have been overlooked? What intimacies have been missed with the Creator of the universe, the author and sustainer of life who perfects our faith?

How do we engage in fruitful Bible reading? We learn how to study, how to “talk” to and listen to the text, to converse with the Author, to hear from Him.

Over twenty years ago, I had the privilege of teaching the sales representatives who were going to be describing to retail bookstore proprietors the value of the International Inductive Study Bible. We were in a day long study session using the book of Haggai, working through the instructions, gleaning truth, and they were excited.

That day, Kay had invited Irving Jensen to have lunch to meet and encourage these reps. He had been a professor at Bryan College in Dayton, Tennessee, not too far away from Chattanooga. At lunch Kay asked if we were at a convenient point in the day, could Dr. Jensen address these sales reps. We were at a good breaking point as we had stopped for lunch, and Dr. Jensen spoke for about an hour. One of the key points from that time was that he said he never read his Bible without a pencil in his hand, to mark, underline, and make notes – to engage in conversation with the text.

That’s what I mean by Bible study – not just reading like you would a novel or the newspaper, but engaged in asking questions, making notes, recording insights.

The spiritual discipline of Bible study has the purpose of intimacy with God – not just knowing about God, but loving God with all your heart, all your mind, all your soul, and all your strength.

Why? Because He is our life. God’s Word says so:

Deuteronomy 32:47

47 For it is no empty word for you, but your very life, and by this word you shall live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess.”
John 6:63
63 It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.

Philippians 1:21
21 For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

Just as prayer is intended for intimacy with God, so too is Bible Study. To love God, you must know Him. To know Him is to love Him.

1 John 4:8
8 Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

So how do I develop that intimacy with God through Bible study? I think there are five basic principles that will help direct your time in the word:

1. Spend time in the Word

God told Israel before they entered the Promised Land:

Deuteronomy 6:4-9
4 “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.
5 You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.
6 And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.
7 You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.
8 You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.
9 You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

2. Believe that it will show you how to live in right relationship to God.

1 Corinthians 10:6, 11
6 Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.
11 Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.

Ps 119:105 – Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

2 Peter 1:19-21
19 And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts,
20 knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation.
21 For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

2 Timothy 2:15
15 Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.
2 Timothy 3:14-17
14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.
15 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,
16 that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

What are we to do with it?

Colossians 3:16
16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God

3. Trust that the Word itself has supernatural power.

God speaks through His Word:

Hebrews 4:12
12 For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Hebrews 1:1-3
1 Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets,
2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.
3 He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.

4. Have a plan – with a schedule

Determine to know God. How do you know Him? The Word of God reveals Him.

How do I get anything out of my Bible reading? I should always be seeking to learn what I can about God, about my relationship to God, principles for life, and revelation about the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

To do that, I make a habit of asking questions based on the who, what, when, where, why and how that are used by all investigators (police, fire, insurance, reporters).

I discipline myself to reason through the text, to try to discover the purpose of a statement – is there a “so that” or some other indicator? What conclusions should I draw from what is said, is there a “therefore?” Does the passage use the device of contrast – two dissimilar or opposite behaviors like the deeds of the flesh contrasted with the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5? Or do we see a comparison to something we can understand principles from, like “I am the Good Shepherd.”

And I read and re-read. My goal is not to “get done” but to “get it,” to understand what God is saying to me and all who have gone before me, timeless truth – but also his word to me in my circumstance of life today. I am not who I was years ago; I’ve changed and circumstances in my life have changed. What is God speaking to me today?

5. Depend upon the Holy Spirit to enlighten you
As 1 Corinthians 2:12-14 (ESV) says,

12 Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God.
13 And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.
14 The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

Consider what Paul prayed on behalf of the church in Ephesus:

Ephesians 1:17-21

17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him,
18 having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,
19 and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might
20 that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places,
21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.

Do you want that? Discipline yourself to study God’s Word.