

## Study Diligently

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**Sermon Series: Seven  
Habits of a Disciple**

2 Timothy 2:15

***But these seven practices are methods that strengthen our discipleship.***

***Now, most of us are old enough to understand the benefit of education, but that doesn't necessarily mean we like studying.***

*“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (King James).*

*“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth” (New Revised Standard).*

This morning, we move to the third of our discipleship practices: study diligently. Pray daily, worship continually, study diligently. Next week, we're going to be doing something special in worship, as our music ministry will be presenting *God Our Refuge*, which was commissioned by Freddie Coulter to celebrate her miraculous recovery from a long coma. Freddie passed away this year, and we mourn her loss— but know that next week's worship will be a great inspiration to you. Then, on October 8, we will start a five-week series on living faithfully, with a particular emphasis on living faithfully within the context of human sexuality. I'm sure you won't want to miss those Sundays!

Your leadership here at VPC believes that these seven practices are formative for our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ. Now, don't get me wrong. Simply DOING these seven practices

won't make you a Christian any more than standing in a garage will make you a car. But these seven practices are methods that strengthen our discipleship. They are exercises designed to strengthen our faith just as physical exercises strengthen our muscles. Lifting weights doesn't create muscles—it strengthens muscles that are already there. And these seven practices won't create faith, but they will help to strengthen the faith you have. Faith is a GIFT— you cannot earn it—but you CAN nurture it and strengthen it by praying daily, worshipping continually and studying diligently.

Now, I don't know about you, but studying is not high on my list of favorite activities. Many of you have kids who have just started back to school, and you're already battling the challenge of getting them to study and do their homework. You know what a hassle it can be. Kids often don't see the benefit of the education process. Like the young girl who started kindergarten and announced to her mother that she was wasting her time going to school because she “couldn't read, couldn't write and they won't let me talk.”

Now, most of us are old enough to understand the benefit of education, but that doesn't necessarily mean we like studying. I know that SOME of you are professional students. But, if given a choice,

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many of us like to avoid studying altogether—or at least postpone it as long as possible.

Two Virginia Tech students were doing well their freshman year and had solid “A’s” going into their organic chemistry final. The final was early Monday morning, but they decided to blow off studying and go to UVA to party with some friends for the weekend, then come back and study Sunday night. But, as things would have it, they stayed longer than they expected. So, they connived to tell their professor that they had a flat tire coming back, got stranded without a spare and missed the final, and ask to take it first thing on Tuesday. The professor agreed and they crammed Monday night. They aced the first of the two exam questions but then floundered on the third question, which was worth the majority of the points on the exam. They were totally confused and completely dismayed at the question that read, “Which tire?”

I know that many of us have a hard time getting around to studying things we must do—and things such as studying the Bible and theology often die on the vine of good intentions. I’m hoping that today I can share some very practical encouragements with you. The last thing I’m going to do is to lay a guilt trip on you for what you haven’t done. Nobody needs that—including me!!

First off, let’s talk about what we study. These words from Timothy that we read this morning were words of instruction and

encouragement to him as a young leader in the church. Paul instructs Timothy to study the sacred Scriptures so that he can understand and explain the Word of Truth. Now, we know that most of you are not going to be studying so that you can teach the Bible—but we all need to study in order to understand the Bible. The Bible is the “original source document,” if you will, of the Christian faith. There are thousands of books written every year ABOUT Christianity—but the Bible is the foundation of our faith. It is the base on which we build all that we believe. Unfortunately, it’s also a very BIG and admittedly CONFUSING book. It can be very tough and intimidating to study the Bible. And, let’s be honest, there are parts of that Good Book that are as dry as the Sahara.

You know, we chose this phrase “study diligently” after much deliberation. At one time, we had “study regularly,” but then, as our leaders thought about it, “regularly” just seemed to be lacking a sense of clarity and focus. “Diligently” has a greater sense of intentionality. To study diligently requires a clarity of focus to our efforts. I don’t think diligence has as much to do with how LONG we study as with how focused we are. I’ll be the first person to admit that I can get easily distracted. And I find that quite often the longer I try to concentrate on something the more distracted I become. I really think that for MOST of us, spending a few minutes of concentrated, focused study is much better than trying to invest long periods of distracted

reflection. If you can spend 60 minutes in earnest study—God bless you!! But just like Pete talked about two weeks ago with prayer, I say study as you CAN, not as you can't.

One of the simplest ways to study is to just take two or three different translations of the same verse or passage and compare them to each other, such as I did this morning with today's sermon text. Note what the differences and similarities may be. Read the passage a couple of times. Read it aloud. Circle the words or phrases that jump out at you. You may not have years of seminary education, but for the most part you've got eyes, ears, a brain and one of these (computer mouse). There are more translations and Bible study tools on-line than one could ever make use of. I've listed some very useful and reliable websites in the bulletin today, and links will be available on our own website as well.

There is no shortage of resources. But one of the real-world challenges in studying the Bible is trying to figure out where to begin. I love what Martin Luther said several centuries ago. He said that when he studied the Bible he studied the Bible like he gathered apples. First, I shake the whole tree that the ripest may fall. Then I shake each limb, and when I have shaken each limb, I shake each branch and every twig. Then, I look under every leaf. I search the Bible as a whole, like shaking the whole tree. Then I shake every limb—study book after book. Then

I shake every branch, giving attention to the chapters. Then I shake every twig—a careful study of the paragraphs and sentences and words and their meanings.

We tend to break the Bible down into little stories without ever really seeing the whole plot. That's one place where DISCIPLE Bible study is so helpful. DISCIPLE really engages the BIG picture of God's relationship with humanity. These classes started this week, and there's plenty of room still available. Maybe today is your call to sign up for one of those concentrated classes or one of our many adult Sunday School classes. Next week, Pete starts teaching a Jesus 101 class that you have the information for. This class is specifically designed for people who know virtually nothing and maybe are a bit afraid to walk into an adult Sunday School class with a bunch of "seasoned Christians."

And one of the great advantages of studying in a class is that it provides an atmosphere of encouragement. It seems like every morning as I'm getting dressed, I hear a commercial for Weight Watchers. I guess the timing isn't coincidental there is it? Weight Watchers claims that their participants lose, on average, three times the weight of other diet programs because of the support and encouragement of the meetings. Doing anything alone or in isolation is tougher than if you're in a group. I would like us to put a herd mentality to GOOD use.

Parents, some of you have a third grader who just got a Bible

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this morning. Be diligent in reading with them. Right now they have a sense of excitement about their new Bibles. Don't let two or three weeks go by before opening it. Read the stories of Jesus to them. Matthew, Mark and Luke are written in a narrative format that makes reading more fun and interesting.

But, in closing today, I want to spend just a few minutes talking about why we study. Learning the Bible is not an ACADEMIC exercise. We study the Bible to change our lives.

One Old Testament professor took a group to the Holy Land. While they were there, they met someone who claimed to have memorized the entire Old Testament. The professor was astonished and intrigued and asked the man to share. So, beginning with Psalm 1, the man recited verse after verse for nearly two hours while the professor sat astonished. But what astonished the professor even more was when he learned that this gifted man was actually an atheist.

Knowing Scripture and theology won't necessarily make a bit of difference if we don't apply it to our lives. That's why our motto for CenterPoint is "Where Faith and Life Connect." Many of you picked up a handout today about our CenterPoint classes that start next week. You can still register for this term. Whether we study in CenterPoint or DISCIPLE, Bible Study Fellowship, at breakfast with a cup of coffee or on the Metro—we study because we want

to pass a very important test—and that test is the test of life. We SAY here at VPC that we want to be a "disciple-making" church. Well, the REAL test of our lives as disciples of Jesus is whether or not we're living differently TODAY than we were last year.

We study not to fill our brains with knowledge, but to fill our lives with hope.

Let us pray...

Lord, we recognize that studying takes diligent effort—something we don't always want to do. Remind us that we are studying so that our lives might be transformed. Open new doors, new vistas, new meanings to your ancient but living Word. Amen.

