

THE SPIRITUAL PRACTICES PART 3

– THE PRACTICE OF STUDY

- A. This talk is the last of our three talks on the spiritual practices. In this talk, we are going to discuss the spiritual practice of study.
- a. Study can be a difficult practice for people to come to terms with because there is a strong bias in various Christian traditions against taking a rational approach to spiritual issues. Sometimes it is articulated out loud. But more often it is just assumed...there as part of the background furniture, part of the culture. The background assumption is that Christianity has to do primarily with things like love, faith, and belief, which after all are not so complicated or difficult to understand. And so, it is felt that Christianity is a religion of the heart, and not of the head. Unfortunately, this is completely wrong, and a tremendously damaging and dangerous idea.
 - i. In this talk, we are going to demonstrate that the Bible teaches that Christianity is a religion of both the heart, and of the head.
 - b. That might sound quite strange to some of you. And that is because, people today, both Christian and secular, tend to think that ideas having to do with God and with religion do not really constitute knowledge. They think that these subjects are areas of opinion, preference, tradition and culture.
 - i. But this is not so. Actually, you can be right or wrong in what you think about spiritual things. The same as you can be right or wrong in math, history, or any other field.
- B. And we will begin this talk by noticing that there is some degree of general confusion in most areas...math, history, and what not. But that amount of confusion in these areas absolutely pales in comparison to the enormous degree of confusion present regarding spiritual issues. Why is there so much confusion, everywhere, on the spiritual life? On the things that matter most? On the meaning of life? On morality?
- a. To answer this, we must appreciate that the Bible always invites us to look beyond the superficial. And the Bible insists that beneath the widespread cruelty, violence and loss in our world is a deeper, more fundamental reality. There is someone unspeakably obscene, anti-life, anti-beauty, coercive and cunning at work behind the visible evils of our world. A very powerful person who hates you, intensely. Who relentlessly works toward humanity's ruin.
 - b. Now, in terms of Satan's modus operandi, we are quite attracted to flashy depictions of evil such as are featured in popular Hollywood movies. But the Bible, instead, insists that Satan's primary mode of interaction with humanity has to do with his working on the way that we understand things to be.
 - c. For instance, notice that ideas are what the Devil used in his assault on Jesus in the wilderness. It is not as though Satan tried to beat Jesus in a wrestling match or zap Him with lightning bolts, is it? The attack was at the level of his mind.
 - d. And false ideas are the primary way that Satan attacks us, as well.
 - i. *The god of this age has **blinded the minds** of unbelievers 2 Corinthians 4:4*

- ii. *See to it that no one takes you **captive** through hollow and deceptive philosophy Colossians 2:8*
 - iii. *Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the **schemes** of the devil Ephesians 6: 11*
 - iv. *...In order that Satan might not **outwit** us. For we are not unaware of his **schemes**. 2 Corinthians 2:11*
- e. And why does he use ideas? Satan has taken this approach because deception is an extraordinarily powerful and effective weapon.
 - i. After all, our ideas about things control what we do.
 - 1. A very simple example is eating a piece of meat. If you believe it is poisonous you will not eat it. If you think it is safe, you will eat it.
 - 2. So, by influencing what people believe, Satan can influence what people do. And this is much more effective than him simply trying to force people to do things.
 - ii. Primarily, the devil's concern with you is to rob you of the truth. Because someone who does not have the truth does not have the ability to deal with reality as it actually is. That is a truly terrifying thought.
 - 1. Winston Churchill famously said, "The empires of the future will be empires of the mind."
 - a. I am pointing out that the empire of Satan is such an empire. An empire of the mind.
 - 2. Dallas Willard said, "We truly live at the mercy of our ideas; this is never more true than with our ideas about God."
 - 3. As an illustration of this, what is Jesus's assessment of those who were torturing him? "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*" Luke 23:34. They do not know. They have been deceived. With deadly consequences. In fact, they thought they were doing a good thing.
 - 4. The same idea is present in one of the most remarkable passages in *The Letter to the Romans*. In *Romans 9*, Paul stops and considers the sad case of the Jewish people. So many of them had rejected Jesus. As a Jew, Paul confesses that this is absolutely heartbreaking for him. And he wonders... How could the Jews have misunderstood Christ? First Paul notes that in terms of experience and background, the Jews had every advantage, every headstart over the gentiles.
 - 5. *Theirs is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all. Romans 9:4-5.* So, they should have known. But they didn't. And next Paul offers the explanation as to why many of the Jews missed Christ:
 - a. *For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is **not based on knowledge**. Romans 10:2*

- b. As Paul notes here, sure, they were zealous. Very religious, very devout. But they had wrong ideas about things. And as a result, they were looking at Jesus through the wrong set of lenses, and so they could not see Him clearly.
 - c. So, is religious zeal, is devotion, a good thing? Is it good for Christians to be passionate, dedicated to the cause? Amped up, excited? Absolutely, if they have come to a knowledge of the truth of Christ's teachings and way of life. Otherwise, Christians in that amped up state are horribly destructive and dangerous.
 - i. Think about the Crusades, or the Inquisition, or the Salem Witch Trials.
- f. What we are starting to see is that Satan's deception is actually simply his means to an even more terrible end. His deception is the means by which he achieves his empire, his rule, his kingdom of darkness on earth. It is the way he achieves human domination.
 - i. *When he lies, [Satan] speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.... He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him.... Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. John 8*
 - 1. Note that, in this passage, it all starts with the lie. And the lie is Satan's means of achieving our murder, and slavery.
 - 2. Satan's great and central lie takes many forms, but the essence never changes. **The great lie** is that in order to be free and happy, we must, at times, do what is wrong.
 - ii. The great lie presents wrong-doing as the path to freedom. "Don't be under the oppressive and limiting thumb of God, do what you want to do."
 - 1. However, the sad reality is that when we do sin, we do not gain freedom, we lose it.
 - a. That is because sin, by its nature, is something that is progressively more difficult to resist, the more we step into it. Sinning corrupts us, it weakens us. Our hearts become hard. Less able to will and to do the good. In *Romans 6*, Paul describes sin as *the master of unregenerate human beings, reigning in their bodies*. Satan uses sin to enslave and dominates us.
 - i. Think of a heroin addict.
 - ii. Or, more commonly, being rude or difficult with your family when you get angry. Is that really something you want to do. Does that make you happy?
 - 1. So why do you do that? Because we just can't help it.

2. Satan has his hooks deep in us, and we do not realize how deep, until we really start to strive hard to do good, and then we find out just how difficult these things are for us to overcome.
2. As Christians, there is a part of us that is unregenerate, which is controlled by sin. And a part of us that is regenerate, and is not controlled by sin.
 - a. Satan wants to grow the unregenerate part. To bring us to the point where we have less and less control of ourselves. To turn us into self-centered nightmares. Satan wants to get us to the place where he can rule us. He wants to demean us. He wants slaves.
 - b. God wants to grow the regenerate part. Unlike Satan, God isn't interested in controlling you. Instead, God wants to help you find your true self. Where you are free. Where you are doing what you want, and what is healthy for you. God wants children.
 - i. Contrary to what Satan would have you believe, God is always looking to exalt and dignify humans. And so, bowing the knee to God doesn't demean us, it dignifies us.
- iii. The second aspect of Satan's great lie is to present wrong-doing as life-enhancing. In today's language, Satan offers us pleasure, happiness, enlightenment.
 1. Now, the reality is that it is those who obey God who are whole, flourishing, happy, wise, strong, and grateful people.
 2. And the way of disobedience that leads to misery and pain.
 - a. Jesus taught in *John 10* that Satan comes *to steal, kill, and destroy (John 10:10)*. But that Jesus came...*that we might have life and have it abundantly*.
 - b. Sin is not life-enhancing. Actually, when we sin, it destroys and ruins things, most especially ourselves. The reality is that sin takes things away from us, robs us. *Satan comes to steal*.
 - i. And the deeper you are in sin, the more that is taken away. Until at the utmost depth, everything is taken away. That's spiritual death, in its various forms. That is why the Bible always links sin with spiritual death. *The wages of sin is death Romans 6:23*. Here is how James puts it, *each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. James 1:15*

- c. A perfect illustration of satanic deception, domination and destruction is Gollum from the Lord of the Rings. In the end, he was not free to choose anything. He was only free to choose one thing. The ring. It had mastered him. He chose to be tortured for it, he murdered for it. He died for it.
 - iv. To summarize, deception, domination, and destruction are the work of Satan. Truth, freedom, and human flourishing are the work of God.
 - 1. If we remember these things when we are tempted, we will not so easily fall.
- g. Let me ask you a question... Why isn't the great lie obvious to us? Why is humanity so weak and foolish? Despite all of our sophistication and intelligence, why is it that we are so often taken, in big and little ways, into the same old traps? Why do we see the same types of pathetic stories on the news, year after year? And how are we continually bested by something just so exceedingly foolish, so staggeringly stupid and wrongheaded? Tricked into greed, falsehood, discord, and every other evil work? Why, after all these thousands of years of human civilization, are the horrors of racism, war, abuse, and every other evil so insidious, so hard to eradicate?
 - i. Because the devil is exceedingly good at what he does. The great lie and all the rest of this sounds so obvious in the abstract. But the tricky part is, in the particulars of our own lives and in the situations that we find ourselves, it is not all obvious. With Satan's clever spin on it, sin does not appear to us as disgusting, damaging, or painful. Instead, it very much appears reasonable, enriching, attractive. How did the apple look to Eve? Excellent! *Good for food, and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom. Gen 3:6.*
 - 1. Paul says that "*Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.*" 2 *Corinthians 11:14.*
 - 2. We discussed Jesus' temptation already. And I hope you understand that those false ideas did not present themselves to Jesus in a ridiculous, far-fetched or foolish way. Quite the contrary. You would have had to have been enormously perceptive, wise, and discerning to see through that clever bit of trickery. Fortunately, Jesus was.
 - ii. The way that the Devil does things is that the untruth is all cleverly mixed in among the good and true things. When we interact with music and the arts, in traditions and in family structures, in the media, our religious institutions, in the sciences and in academic establishments, in all of it.
 - 1. We are up against is a concealed, subtle and pervasive system of thought which is opposed to the truth, opposed to goodness, and opposed to God.
 - 2. As a result of this, we are constantly inundated with a way of thinking that is, in fact, false.
 - a. It is not that we are presented any particular rational argument for evil. Instead, it is that the popular, basic working assumptions of our day are false. Satanic deception has much

- more to do with the way that we generally feel about things, than any logical reasoning.
3. One of many examples of this subtle, destructive deception at work in our own time is the widespread social acceptance of abortion.
 - a. After all, pro-choice folks are doing what they think is right. They sincerely believe that abortion can be helpful and is the better choice in certain circumstances.
 - b. Abortion is an example of catastrophic numbers of people being, quite literally, destroyed due to a lack of knowledge.
 - i. We can see that, as they saying goes, “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.”
 4. That is how radical evil always works. Just sitting there, dressed up as something else. In plain sight. Tolerated. Civilly discussed. Rationally argued for. The way that slavery was in its day. The way that the mistreatment of women was and is in so many cultures.
 - a. Evil has its deceitful tentacles coursing and interweaving everywhere. Working underneath the surface of things, bending and twisting things not so much that it’s obvious, but just enough. In ways beyond our capacity even to grasp. And so, without even knowing it, we participate in evil.
 - b. That is the power of the Devil. That his lies take different forms in different contexts. And as a result, we are often entirely blind to it in our own context. We are blind to our own blind spots.
 - i. And not only at a social level. But also, at an individual level. Each of us are simply unable to see our wrong doing and our own wrong thinking.
 - h. That is the Biblical assessment of humanity. Decieved, confused, muddled in our thinking. And this is not just its assessment of non-Christians. Instead, the Bible points out that sadly, so often, we ourselves, the people of God, are in the same boat. In fact, we find that the Bible is more often pointing the finger at us, and not at them!
 - i. In fact, despite the best efforts of talented and dedicated people like Jesus and Paul, very often, in Scripture we find the people of God continuing to harbor all sorts of wrong and harmful spiritual ideas, and being confronted by intense correction.
 - ii. As the prophet Hosea observed of the ancient Jews:
 1. *My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge. Hosea 4:6*
 - iii. And it was the same thing in Jesus’s day. Consider His own disciples. If anyone had their knowledge straight, it should have been them. But we find that even after having seen and been with Him through so many things, listening to so many of His teachings, even after the resurrection itself, as they walked the Road to Emmaus, this is what Jesus had to tell them:
 1. *“How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Luke 24:25*

- iv. And likewise, the sad fact is that we, the people of God today, unfortunately, harbor all different sorts of confusions and wrong ideas, resulting in major pain and suffering for ourselves and those around us.
 - 1. As it has been said, “It ain’t what you don’t know that gets you into trouble. It’s what you know for sure that just ain’t so.”
- C. What a dire situation. And so, when Jesus showed up on the scene of human history, what did He do about it? He fought fire with fire. He spent an enormous amount of time teaching and reasoning with people. He wanted so badly to give His followers a new way of thinking. To reorient them.
 - a. *Consider the lilies of the field (Matthew 6:28)*, Jesus encouraged them. *Consider the birds of the air (Matthew 6:26)*. Stop. Look around you. Open your eyes. Think things through again.
 - b. Jesus could have just done away with all that teaching, all that talk, and just went right to the cross. But something critical would have been lost. That precious knowledge that He had. That they needed. To know how things actually are. The Great Teacher made sure His apprentices knew what they needed to know before He went to the cross.
 - c. Even after the cross, even after His resurrection, on the road to Emmaus, what do we find Him doing? Teaching. *And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself Luke 24:27*
 - d. And after this? The Teacher continues teaching right up until His ascension. *He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. Acts 1:3*
 - e. And what do we find Jesus’s apprentices themselves doing after His ascension? Teaching. Among other things, spending enormous time and energy trying to give their own apprentices this same body of spiritual knowledge.
 - i. For instance, *The Letter to the Romans* is one of the only surviving things we have that Paul wrote to Christians he had never met. What did Paul feel was of crucial importance to communicate to new believers? What we find in the book of *Romans* is a comprehensive explanation and exploration of the Christian faith, in great detail. Including things like the spiritual history of the Jewish people, how to interact with the Holy Spirit, the nature of Christ, the future of the World, and many other subjects.
 - ii. Paul’s constant contending with false ideas is his foremost concern in so many of his letters.
 - 1. In *Galatians*, for example, he vigorously argues with logic from the Scriptures to correct their misunderstandings. *You foolish Galatians* he says (3:1)! *Who has bewitched you? Understand, then...*and he goes on from there.
 - 2. *“Do not be children in your **thinking**; be babes in evil, but in **thinking** be mature” 1 Corinthians 14:20*
 - 3. *Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of **teaching** and by the*

*cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful **scheming**.*
Ephesians 4:14

4. *We continually ask God to fill you with the **knowledge** of his will through all the **wisdom** and **understanding** that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, **growing in the knowledge of God**.* *Colossians 1:9-10*

- iii. Think about those verses we just read. What are the weapons with which Paul battled the powers of darkness? He, like Jesus, fought fire with fire. Listen to Paul here, *For though we live in the World, we do not wage war as the World does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the World. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish **arguments** and every **pretension** that sets itself up against the **knowledge** of God, and we take captive every **thought** to make it obedient to Christ.* 2 *Corinthians 10:3-5*

1. Weapons, war, fighting, strongholds. This is military language. The battle of the mind.
2. And, speaking of military language, did you ever notice, in that famous passage about our putting on the armor of God, that the only offensive piece of gear that is mentioned is the word of God?
3. The renovation of a person will always start with knowledge. It doesn't end there. But it must start there.

- f. *Romans 12 (verses 1-3) reads Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

- i. Notice that it is only **after** *our mind is renewed, that you will be able to test and approve what God's will is.* Getting our ideas right is step number one.
- ii. You see, the type of Christian that Paul discusses there, who is *conformed to the pattern of the world* has the same assumptions, the same values, the same way of thinking, that the world does. That, sadly, is a very common finding in our churches today.
- iii. But Paul commands us to *stop being conformed to the pattern of this world.* And to be *"transformed by the renewing of your mind."* (Romans 12:2)
- iv. There is a command issued there because our minds being renewed is something we can do something about. Which is why study is a fundamental practice for the spiritual life.

D. Let's now discuss some practical considerations in the practice of study.

- a. First, what exactly are we supposed to be studying? Where are we to find the knowledge that we need? We gain the spiritual knowledge that we need through our interactions with the Spirit, through attention to our consciences, through the wise teachings and writings of other Christians, by observing what God's creation implies about its Creator, through our life experiences and relationships, through intellectual reflection, and in many other important ways. For those with the eyes to see, and

who will take the time to wrestle with it, the truth of things is all around us, as well as inside of us. But centrally and most clearly, we come to know God through Scripture itself. As Dallas Willard pointed out, the Bible is “a book of knowledge.” Of ideas. And it is the most profound book ever written, by far.

- b. So that is what we should study. Now, let’s discuss how we should study.
 - i. The first thing to note is that we must study diligently.
 - 1. You might have noticed that the Bible is fairly large and complex. And that is because the actual body of knowledge that we need in order to be truly successful in the Christian life is fairly significant.
 - a. Consider that, at the end of the book of Acts, Paul is under house arrest. And we read that during this time, Paul spends it teaching the local Jewish leaders *from morning till evening, explaining about **the kingdom of God**, Acts 28:23*
 - i. *For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. He proclaimed **the kingdom of God** and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ*
 - b. Two years of dedicated teaching! Paul was not simply handing someone a tract and leading them through the sinner’s prayer, was he? There was a lot of material to work with, a lot of things to get straight, is the idea.
 - 2. Now, there is a range of intellectual abilities in the body of Christ. We are not all going to be theological giants. But each of us must do our very best to grasp what we are able to from the Bible, was the teaching of Christ. *“Love God with all our heart, and all our soul and all our **mind**.” (Matthew 22:37)*
 - a. Actually, a lot of Jesus’s followers were anything but scholars. Fisherman for instance...not intellectuals. But you have to applaud the intellectual effort involved on the part of His uneducated apprentices. They left their homes and places of work. Battling through misunderstandings time and time again. This was a full-time job for them. Learning from Him. Following Him around, asking questions, watching Him, listening to Him, pondering His words and actions, getting things wrong, getting corrected.
 - i. What do you think...would coming to understand what Jesus taught be worth that for you? Would you sign up for that? A few years of dedicated apprenticeship?
 - 3. Each of us need to do the amount of work required until we have come into a wise and functional understanding of the world and our place in it. There are things that we need to know. For some of us, more work will be required. For some, less. Depends where you are starting from.

- a. That is why we, in this community, have committed to an hour a week of dedicated study. That is not an excessive amount. Instead, that is a reasonable and balanced amount that can be effectively integrated with the rest of our lives. Excessive study is not good because we do not want to over-intellectualize Christianity...which is foolish and harmful. But anyway, on the whole, frankly today, we much, much more often under-intellectualize it.
- b. But when we say an hour a week, we are talking about what is called active study. Not passive reading or listening. Because passively reading something is among the very least efficient and effective ways of learning.
 - i. For example, imagine trying to learn how to do plumbing by passively reading through plumbing manuals.
 - ii. Instead, I would encourage you to study the Bible, not to read it. Reading commentaries along with the text, looking things up online, making outlines, researching passages and questions that are confusing to you, filling out a study guide, etc.
 - iii. The best way to start with this type of study is to just read through the New Testament, and whenever you come across a passage or an idea that you don't understand, you stop. And research it online, or in commentaries. Or ask someone who is knowledgeable to explain it to you. Once you understand it, move on.
- ii. The second thing to note is that we must study humbly.
 1. When we discussed the other spiritual practices, we emphasized that they must be undertaken from a humble approach, or they will end up being counterproductive.
 - a. It is the same with the practice of study.
 2. Jesus said this to the religious leaders of His day: *You study the Scriptures **diligently** because you think that in them you have eternal life.* Wow. Great start there. Diligent study. They knew their stuff, didn't they? And they had an appreciation of the crucial importance of Scripture. So what was their problem?...*These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life. John 5:39-40*
 - a. Doesn't do much good studying the Scriptures if we are unwilling to be corrected by them, does it?
 3. Here is Peter: *[Paul's] letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction. 2 Peter 3:16*

- a. Did you know that Bible is a dangerous thing? Sobering to realize that the Bible is a destructive force in some people's lives, and not a healing force.
 - i. If you are studying the Bible in order to firm up and reinforce what you already believe to be true, the Bible will just be a mirror to you, mirroring your own fractured and false views back. In fact, even worse, reinforcing them with God's stamp of approval.
 - 1. Unfortunately, that is quite a common occurrence today.
 - ii. But, if you approach it humbly, the Bible will be not a mirror but a telescope to you, through which you can see another world.
- 4. Peter says elsewhere...*You will do well to pay attention to Scripture, as to a light shining in a dark place. 2 Peter 1:19*
 - a. We are in a dark place, is the idea there. Notice that Peter is teaching that in order to benefit from Scripture, we must approach the Bible with a humble attitude.
- 5. We need to learn, to have our thinking challenged and changed. We study the Bible because we are confused and ignorant. If you already knew what you needed to know, you wouldn't need the Bible.
 - a. *Do not be wise in your own eyes*, reads *Proverbs 3:7*.
- 6. The fact of the matter is that we all have many different wrong ideas about God, about ourselves, and about the World.
 - a. To paraphrase Augustine, "If you understand it perfectly and completely, then it is not God." After all, God is a subject without bottom. There is always more to learn.
 - b. We don't like to be wrong. It is uncomfortable. But, actually, wrong ideas about God don't mean that you are hopeless.
 - i. If you are arrogant, you are hopeless.
 - ii. But as long as you're humble, you'll be willing to listen to the right ideas, and get turned around quite easily.
 - iii. Humility is our doorway into the life of Christ. It's a low doorway. You have to stoop low to enter.
- 7. Christians often get this whole thing entirely backwards. They are nervous about knowledge, and about study, thinking that they lead to arrogance.
 - a. But the fact is that true wisdom, and real knowledge will always bring about humility in a person.
 - i. And, it is actually ignorant people who are arrogant, not knowledgeable people.
 - ii. *Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. 1 Corinthians 8:2*

- c. So, study diligently, and study humbly. Because without the right ideas you are dead in the water.
 - i. “*God chose you as firstfruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.*” 2 Thessalonians 2:13 NIV
 - ii. How were they saved? Through the work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. Saved through belief in the truth huh? Well, what if you don’t know the truth?
 - 1. Not going to get too far.
 - iii. William Lane Craig put it this way... In order for us to come to know God, we must first come to know about God. Same as with any human relationship. Knowledge comes first.

(END OF AUDIO SEGMENT ONE)

(START OF AUDIO SEGMENT TWO)

- E. Now, let’s move on now to the second half of this talk. We are now going to discuss that, by itself, knowledge will only get us half of the way where we need to be. Faith gets us the other half of the way there.
 - a. Think about it like this: Right ideas are the foundation. Faith is the building. Faith builds on knowledge.
 - b. Now, that statement is likely very confusing for some of you because Christians and non-Christians alike often have the idea in their minds that knowledge has nothing to do with faith. People typically feel that knowledge has to do with knowing something, whereas faith has to do with simply choosing to believe something.
 - i. On this view, to accept something by faith is take something a given, unquestioningly. Do we know that its true? No, we just choose to believe it. That is the idea there.
 - ii. They might point out: “Doesn’t the Bible say that *we walk by faith and not by sight?* 2 Corinthians 5:7?.
 - c. But read carefully. Faith is opposed to sight. Not to knowledge.
 - i. Faith is opposed to sight, because faith deals with things that are not visible.
 - d. Faith and reason are never opposed to each other in the Bible.
 - i. Instead, the Biblical idea is that faith and knowledge are both crucial for effective Christian living.
 - 1. For instance, *Make every effort to add to your faith...knowledge* says Peter. 2 Peter 1:6
 - e. And here is how faith and knowledge relate to each other: Faith is putting what you know into action.
 - i. **Faith** is trust. That is the biblical idea of faith. Trust. What you place your confidence in.
 - 1. Let’s look at *James Chapter 2*. First, James makes note of the fact that knowledge is the necessary foundation. *You believe that there is one God. Good!* But James, continues, knowledge alone is not enough. He next says, *even the demons believe [there is one God]—and shudder.*

Not doing the demons too much good is it, their knowledge of God?
Why not? Because they don't trust God.

- ii. James's point is that we need both the truth and trust of the truth. Faith is when we act on what we know to be true. Knowledge involves the mind; faith involves the will.
 - 1. Take a secular example. You could have the finest understanding of business principals and finance in the entire World, but if you don't put some money up and start a business, you won't make a cent.
 - 2. *James (2:21-22) elsewhere puts it this way: Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he **did** when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he **did**.*
 - 3. *I will show you my faith by my deeds* James says. *Faith without works is dead.*
 - 4. Faith always expresses itself in action.
- f. So, say you are struggling in a particular area. Say with being kind to your spouse or patient with your children or a good employee at work or whatever else...there are two possibilities. You may be hung up on knowledge. Or you may be hung up on faith.
 - i. Let's say that you are hung up on knowledge. That means you don't have your ideas straight. It means that deep down, you actually think that doing the right thing will just make you miserable, or is really not necessary, or some other thing like that.
 - 1. And what should you do about if a knowledge deficit is the problem? As we have been saying, hangups with knowledge are addressed by the spiritual practice of study.
 - ii. But the other possibility is that you do have the knowledge. That is not your hangup. You are instead hung up on faith. This means that you do realize the truth of the matter, but do not act on it.
 - 1. You are trying to trust and to act, but you are unable to because you are simply a prisoner of your passions and impulses. Or of bad habits.
 - a. The way this is addressed is by sticking with the other practices, which address the other parts of the human person. Study will help your mind. Prayer, community, fasting, worship, solitude and the like will address those other parts of yourself. If you stick with them, it will help move the impulse to do good out from your mind and into your will, your physical body, and all the rest of it, so that you will succeed in the time of testing.
- g. And one specific thing that really helps bridge the gap between knowledge and faith is Scripture memorization. When we memorize Scripture, we take God's way of thinking into ourselves. That is why it is much better to memorize passages of Scripture, as opposed to individual verses, to get the entire coherent thought process.

And the result of stewing over a passage and turning it over in your mind here and there throughout the day is that it will start to work on you. Importantly, you will find that the memorized Scripture will pop into your mind at different points, when a situation or idea related to it comes up in your life. And when it does pop up, then you will have a decision, whether or not to bring that Scripture to bear on this situation. Whether or not you are going to bring the realities described in Scripture into your own life. Whether you are going to exercise faith. To trust God.

- F. Once you do that. Once you do the hard work to get the knowledge, and then add faith to that knowledge, that is when the deep things in your life will really start to change. Here is what Jesus said would happen to you: *“If you hold to my teaching, [then] you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and [then] the truth will set you free.” (John 8:31)*
- a. Let’s walk through this teaching. Here, there is a sacred sequence here of spiritual progression. A necessary order of things, sketched out clearly. And what is the starting point?
 - i. ONE. It all starts with our first studying and learning the teachings of Christ.
 - ii. And what comes next? TWO. Our choosing to live out what is commanded in that teaching.
 1. And it is only after number TWO..Only in the dedicated process of following Jesus’s way of life, only then, will we come to number THREE.
 - iii. What is THREE? Our coming to know the truth of things.
 - iv. And next? FOUR. You are set free.
 - b. One through four. Study, obedience, truth, freedom. Truth follows obedience. That is always the way it works.
 - i. A deep, enlightening understanding only comes once we are first obedient to the small amount of truth that we have to start with.
 - ii. You see, Satan proposed that the forbidden fruit would bring wisdom.
 1. But it turned out to be just the opposite. In fact, sin darkens, it blinds us.
 - a. What did we read earlier from *Romans (chapter 1)*? *Seeking to become wise, they became fools.*
 2. And contrary to what the Devil would have you believe; goodness and obedience do not blind us. They enlighten.
 - a. *The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes. Psalm 19:7-11*
 - iii. What we do, determines what we become. What we become, determines how we see. “We see the World not as it is, but as we are,” as Anaïs Nin put it.
 - iv. You know, we talked a lot about the clever lies of the Devil earlier. But can we really blame all of our wrong-headedness on the Devil? No. Sadly, the answer is that we are deceived because deep down, we want to be. Deep down, we know the truth, at least partially, at least initially. But we chose to turn away from it and are willfully complicit in our own deception.

- a. *2 Thessalonians 2:10 "...wickedness deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved."*
2. Why do we refuse to love the truth? Because of what the truth would require of us. Acknowledging the truth would mean acknowledging various aspects of our life that need to change. It would be a letting go of the sin that has gripped us. A turning toward goodness.
 - a. *This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God. John 3:19-21*
 - b. And, sadly, this persistent hiding from the light changes us. In the dark, we lose the ability to see things clearly. More and more, the longer we persist in darkness, we become more and more blind. Eventually, it becomes more and more impossible for a person truly see and understand themselves.
 - c. "Above all, don't lie to yourself. The man who lies to himself and listens to his own lie comes to a point that he cannot distinguish the truth within him, or around him, and so loses all respect for himself and for others. And having no respect he ceases to love." — Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*
 - d. How did those people we mentioned earlier come to the place where they sincerely believed that executing Jesus was the right thing to do? It all started with that initial turning away from the truth. Their cooperation with their own deception. And eventually, they came to the point where they believed the lie. The lie was their truth.
3. The human capacity for self-deception is almost infinite. And from it comes all the rationalization...All the justification that we time and time again put forth. Justifying our evil, cruel, and selfish actions in all sorts of irrational and ridiculous ways. **The great decent.**
 - a. We see the great decent sketched out quite clearly in Romans.
 - i. *For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools. Romans 1:21-22*
 - ii. *As they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God*

- iii. It all starts with a rejection of the truth. Leaving the path of understanding, and stepping onto the path of untruth. Which leads to this...
 - iv. *So, God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done (verse 28).*
 - v. And you can read on from there yourselves. It describes humanity's horrible decent into madness and pain. And the resulting flourishing of the widespread sin, evil and suffering that have resulted from our obstinate rejection of the truth.
 - 4. Learning to see more clearly is not simply an intellectual exercise. Study alone is not sufficient to come to know God.
 - a. Sometimes, people complain that they want to know God, they have searched for God, but they just can't see Him. He is elusive.
 - i. God is not elusive. In fact, He wants very much to be found.
 - ii. And, as Jesus taught *everyone who seeks, finds* Matthew 7:8
 - iii. Anyone, anywhere, at any time can start on the path of Christ, and can start on that process of coming to know God.
 - 1. But we are often quite obstinately sticking put on the path of sin and ignorance.
 - 2. Not knowing God is a choice.
 - b. God is not merely some intellectual problem that we need to work out. Instead, He is the light of Reality Itself. You are struggling with the fundamental issues of human existence in coming to know God. In accepting the truth of things, we are not just opening the eyes of our mind. We are opening the eyes of our heart.
 - c. The light of true knowledge is only found on the path of goodness and love. As we slowly venture out on the path of Christ, the light around us increases. We gradually begin to see correctly.
- G. There is only one way out of the predicament in which we find ourselves. Jesus will show you the way. Into Reality. Trust Jesus Christ.
 - a. If you do that, you will find out that what He taught is true. It really does work. In your own life. Exercising faith in Christ leads us into the place where we ourselves obtain the faith of Christ. And, as Dallas Willard pointed out, that is what we need. The faith of Christ. We must come to know and to trust what Christ Himself knew and trusted.
 - b. *[In Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Colossians 2: 3.*

- c. He knows. What you need to know is hidden in Christ.
 - d. *Christ will show you the Father (John 14:9).*
 - i. And that, more than anything else, is what you need to be happy and free.
 - e. You were made to know God. In fact, coming to know God is the highest and best thing you could ever hope to achieve.
 - f. *Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. John 17:3*
 - i. What is eternal life? As Dallas Willard pointed out, this passage says that eternal life is knowledge. Eternal life is knowing God. Obeying Him. Loving Him. Cooperating with Him.
 - ii. Knowing God is the way into the life you have always wanted.
- H. We will end this talk by asking, what is it actually like when you follow Jesus into the truth? To become the kind of person who at last sees the World the way that it actually is?
- a. Well, it is not just that certain particular perceptions of yours will change. Instead, it is that you will be looking differently, so that everything will, in fact, look different. There is so much beauty and goodness around us that we simply fail to see, to appreciate. Everything will begin to take on an added depth, significance and wonder when we are looking at things through the eyes of Christ.
 - b. However, we can highlight two notable particular areas that will be impacted.
 - i. One major area of change is that we will find ourselves moving out of that comfortable and convenient self-deception that we have been discussing, and which is such a prominent feature in human life, and into self-awareness. Now, this shift can be painful.
 - 1. It is very difficult to honestly confront who and what we are.
 - a. In fact, the only way to do so, is to maintain a high degree of sensitivity, not just to the teachings of the Bible as we come to know them, but also to the feedback of others.
 - b. We need that difficult feedback because the parts of ourselves that are most problematic and destructive are often much more obvious to others, than to ourselves.
 - i. That is why being in an intimate community of some sort is absolutely crucial for spiritual growth.
 - ii. Marriage, for instance, is supremely effective at pointing out our blind spots!
 - iii. But intimate community will only be of help to us if we are humble and willing to listen, and to change.
 - c. How can you tell where you are at in this process of self-awareness?
 - i. Alexander Maclaren said, "The sign of growing perfection is the growing consciousness of imperfection.... The more you become like Christ the more you will find out your unlikeness to Him."
 - ii. Similarly, C. S. Lewis wrote, "When a man is getting better, he understands more and more clearly the evil

that is still in him. When a man is getting worse, he understands his own badness less and less”

- d. As you go through this difficult process of self-awareness always remember, God at all times loves and accepts you completely, despite the great big mess that you are!
 - e. And remember, while this process of growing in self-awareness can be painful for you, it is quite fruitful and refreshing for those around you! In order to really love others well, you must go through it.
- ii. Another major area of change that will occur in our way of thinking is in how we think about sin.
- 1. Because when you come to know the truth, you will come to know that the sinful things you are desiring, that are tempting you, are like eating pig slop, as Dallas Willard put it. And when you believe that, you simply will not desire to do those things anymore. And so, without any great effort of will, you will choose not to do them. It is not such a tough decision at that point, is it? That thing has lost its hold on you. Because you have been set free, by the truth. You have been *transformed by the renewing of your mind (Romans 12:2)*.
 - 2. *Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. John 17:17*
 - a. Folks, the truth will sanctify you, if you will let it.
 - b. It all starts with the truth.

I. Lets summarize this talk:

- a. One. We are involved in a great battle of the mind, and under constant assault from the father of lies. The spiritual practice of diligent and humble study is how God works with us in the renovation of our minds.
- b. Two. While the right ideas are necessary, they are not sufficient by themselves. We must take the next step of faith, which is trusting and acting on the truth.
- c. Three. Trust and obedience in the way of Christ will lead us out of darkness and confusion. And into profound insight. It will lead us into knowing God, into an interactive relationship with God.
- d. Four. This knowledge of God will set us free. We will come to see ourselves as we truly are, sinful and broken. This will enable us to have realistic, full and healthy relationships with those around us. And also, the more we are in the truth, the more we will see the grotesque nature and the stupidity of sin, and will not find it appealing.

Father, help us to *get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and to humbly accept the word you have planted in us, which can save us. (James 1:21)*

Amen