

# Reading For The Love of God

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Various passages

July 22, 2012

## Introduction:

This morning we're going to take a little break in our study of the gospel of Matthew and instead I want to spend our time together discussing with you the importance of reading in the life of a Christian. Now I recognize right out of the gate when I mention reading I am facing a mostly hostile audience since what often is said to me when the subject of reading comes up is, "Well, I don't like to read." If I had a nickel for every time I heard that comment I would easily be able to take Karen on a two-week Mediterranean cruise. So I realize that some of you might already be crossing your arms and erecting a mental barricade against what I'll have to say this morning but nevertheless I will attempt to do my best to uncross your arms and tear down your barricade in order to make my case for the necessity of a disciplined practice of reading good books.

One does not have to look very far to find statistics on the decline of reading. In a 2008 article in *First Things*, Sally Thomas quotes from a book from Emory University professor Mark Bauerlein entitled *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future*, where he "offers exhaustive statistics that point to steep drop-offs in reading habits and general knowledge over the last twenty-five years. In the eighteen-to-twenty-four-year-old demographic, for example, literary reader rates have declined by 17 percentage points since 1982." (*First Things*, November 2008, 187).

The effect of this is vividly illustrated on the popular *Jaywalking* segment on the *Tonight Show* where Jay Leno stops people on the street and asks them basic questions about political and historical figures which they are often unable to answer. This growing decline in literacy has been a concern for some time. Go back fifty years ago to the golden age of television and you will find warnings of what TV would do to young minds. But at least we had only one idiot box back then with only three networks to choose from: sadly, the idiot box has borne children. Today we inhabit a society where 500 cable television stations are readily available for our viewing pleasure, not to mention the billions of web sites, DVDs, video games, iPods, iPads, and cell phones, allowing us at any moment to whittle away our time playing Angry Birds, finding out on Facebook what our college roommate ate for breakfast, texting our friends, and Tweeting our thoughts to the world in 140 characters or less. Who has time for reading anymore, especially a book that seeks to present an argument over a few hundred pages? For many of us, if it can't fit in a Facebook posting, then it's just too long to bother reading.

This dumbing down of our culture has affected our churches. Our young people, if they read books for pleasure at all, will be more fluent in discussing the key events that take place in *Harry Potter* or *The Hunger Games* than they will of the events found in *Matthew*, *Mark*, *Luke*, or *John*. As our lives becomes increasingly dominated by an entertainment culture, we then bring those demands with us into the church, so that times of corporate worship become rock concerts and expository preaching is rapidly replaced by self-help messages accompanied by video clips, costume changes, comedy-club humor, and

other gimmicks to keep people's attention (and attendance) at all costs. One wonders if we did a Christian version of *Jaywalking* would we even find it funny since many of us would be as hard pressed as the person being interviewed to answer the most basic questions about doctrine and Scripture.

So then there's the need to read, but how does one convince people who've been suckling at the breast of popular culture for all their lives, who've never been weaned off the diet of the milk of banal situation comedies, narcissistic Facebook posts, limitless movie options on Netflix, and the historically rich programming found these days on the History Channel such as *Ice Road Truckers* and *Swamp People*? How does one get them to pray as the psalmist did in Psalm 119 saying, "*Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things...Behold, I long for your precepts; in your righteousness give me life!*" (v. 37, 40)? Well, I think the place to start is where we as Christians must always start: the Word of God. So please grab your Bible and open it up to the gospel of Mark as I begin with my first point, which concerns the Biblical basis for reading.

## 1. Biblical basis

We'll begin with a very well-known statement of Jesus found in Mark 10:30. Answering the question posed to him about which commandment is the greatest, Jesus gives this answer in v. 30, "*And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*" I want to focus on the phrase "*with all your mind.*" Jesus calls us to use our minds, our intellectual facilities, in service to loving God. To use our minds is to think right thoughts about God; to ponder who he is and what he has done for us in Christ. This is necessary because at one point apart from God our minds were darkened by sin. Our thoughts were held captive by the world's way of thinking. So as Christians, it is imperative that we turn away from our old way of thinking much in the same way we are to turn away from our old way of living. Consider what Paul says in Romans 12:1-2. Look there with me. He says this to the believers in Rome,

*"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."*

We are to present our bodies as living sacrifices, pleasing to God. This is how are to worship him. And specifically we're to stop being "*conformed to this world*" as we once were but instead we are to be "*transformed.*" But notice how this transformation is to come about: you're to be "*transformed by the renewal of your mind.*" It begins with the mind. Right behavior flows from right thinking. The mind is the horse that pulls the cart of our behavior, not the other way around. In order to worship God with our hands we must first worship him with our head.

Paul models this in how he composes his letters. The first half of his letters begin with doctrine: for example consider the passage in Romans 12 we just looked at. Paul spent

eleven chapters laying a theological foundation by explaining how God has saved us by grace through faith, apart from works. It's only after helping them think correctly about the gospel does he say, "therefore" live in such and such a way. We have to think correctly in order to live correctly.

Paul further demonstrates the importance of worshipping God with your mind by revealing the content of his prayer for God's people. Turn with me to Ephesians 1 in your Bibles. In v. 16-19 of Ephesians 1 he says this,

*"I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, 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, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe..."*

Furthermore, he prays in a similar vein in chapter 3. Look at his prayer in v. 18-19 of Ephesians 3. He prays that they,

*"...may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."*

And how are we to gain this knowledge and understanding into the love of Christ? How is it that we renew our minds? We only need to go one chapter further in Ephesians to find the answer. Look at chapter 4 with me, at v. 11-12. Paul writes,

*"And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ..."*

God has given the church people who can help us grow in Christ. First we have the words of the apostles, divinely inspired as recorded in the NT, and those of the prophets in the OT. The apostles and prophets wrote the Bible so that by reading it we'd be led into a knowledge of the truth. But beyond that, we're also given pastors and teachers, who can then take the Word of God and through preaching and teaching equip God's people for work of service. But we are not limited to only those pastors and teachers who are in our local congregation: through books we can be blessed by teachers who live a thousand miles away from our home or who lived a thousand years away from our present time. Through books, we can be equipped and built up by pastor and teachers who live far from us both in terms of time and distance.

So taken together then, these passages indicate that if we're to love God with our minds and be transformed by the renewal of our minds, then it is imperative we to utilize the God-given means by which our minds are to be transformed: through God's Word preached verbally and God's Word taught in written form. The reading of books by great pastors and teacher both now and in the past is one of the key ways God works to help you renew your mind and grow in your knowledge of Christ.

So having established that growing in your mind, in understanding and comprehending the truths of the gospel and all of Scripture, is an essential part of worshiping God and loving him, and that God accomplishes that in us through the giftedness of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, we now need to turn our attention to the historical privilege we have to learn from these teachers through the written word. So my second point this morning is to give us a sense of our historical privilege.

## 2. The historical privilege

It is easy to forget that how things are now is not how they always were. We live in an amazing age, one that has both a high level of literacy and a high level of affordable books. Let me first highlight the issue of literacy.

For much of the history of the world, the vast majority of people were illiterate. If you were born in a royal house or were the son of a wealthy merchant, you'd likely learn how to read and write. But if you were part of the 95% or more of the common folk, literacy wasn't going to be in the cards for you. Yet today in developed countries like the United States, nearly everyone knows how to read. I can safely assume when I ask you take your Bibles and follow along as I read that every adult here can do so. In our culture, it's extremely rare to find someone who cannot read and write. So the fact that you can read is an exceptional privilege: the vast majority of humanity that has come before you did not possess the skills of reading and writing that you and I take for granted.

Furthermore, we live in a privileged time in terms of the availability of books. Up until about five hundred years ago, all books had to be copied by hand. As a result, only the wealthiest of individuals could afford a book. If the average person even laid eyes on a book in his lifetime, it would be the lone Bible owned by the local church. But with the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg in the fifteenth century, books could be mass-produced. As a result, the number of books produced rapidly increased and the cost of books decreased. Even still, with illiteracy still the norm for the masses, early on only the most learned could read the books being produced. It's not until the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries where we find literacy rates rise through public schooling to allow the average person to both afford books and be able to read them.

This brings us to today, one of the most amazing times in all of human history. Not only can most of us read but most of us have access to a huge selection of books. Books are affordable, and even if we chose not to purchase one, we can easily go to the library and check out books for free. Plus through the internet a myriad of books are available for download cheaply or for free. And if you own a Kindle or an iPad, you can literally carry hundreds of books around with you whenever you'd like. We have astonishing privilege that one could only dream of just twenty years ago, much less five hundred years ago.

Perhaps Jesus words in Luke 12:48 are applicable at this point: *"From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded."* Maybe the calling to love God with all of our minds takes on a much deeper significance for those of us who have available the gift of books and literacy. Could it be that God demands more of us who live in the information age than he did of those in the past due to the vast privileges given to us?

### 3. What to read

So then, if we are to take advantage of our ability to read as well as be good stewards of the wealth of books available to us, what then shall we read? Of course, the first and most obvious book we should read is the Bible. Never before has the Bible been so readily available and easy to read. Not only do we have translations that are in modern English, we have study Bibles and study tools readily affordable and accessible. Walk into any Christian bookstore and you'll have a dozens of study Bibles options available to you, along with devotional books, study guides, commentaries, and Bible dictionaries to help you read and understand God's Word. So then at a fundamental level, if you're going to read nothing else, read the Bible. During the first 1500 years of Christianity, the average person couldn't own a Bible and read it for themselves. You can do that. So do it. Worship God by having your mind transformed through the daily disciplined reading of the Word of God.

But beyond that, read good theologically-rich books. God has given the church pastors and teachers who have studied God's Word and followed Christ faithfully and they've written books for your benefit. Find them and read them. Never before in the history of the world has such a wealth of godly wisdom and insight been as readily available to the average Joe as they are today. You don't need to attend a seminary to learn from a NT scholar like D. A. Carson, nor do you need to live in Minneapolis to sit under the teaching of a pastor like John Piper; they are available to you through books. And you do not need to build a time machine out of a Delorian to travel back in time to listen to the preaching of Jonathan Edwards or hear the thunderous words of the great reformer Martin Luther. Through books, you can hear them speak. Books are our time machine to let us converse with men long dead but whose thoughts can spark our imaginations and teach us and transform us even today. The wealth of teaching and preaching of hundreds of years in thousands of locations are available to us through books.

Of course, with the proliferation of books comes the publishing of books not worth reading. Admittedly it is difficult for me to go into a store like Family Christian Store here in Waterloo without leaving angry and frustrated due to the number of books promoted that are at best questionable in their doctrine and at worse so lamentable theologically that the only conceivable usefulness of the book would be to tear out its pages to use as toilet paper in an emergency. Reading does you little good spiritually unless it is of a nourishing nature, full of the meat of good theology and the vegetables of rigorous thinking. A diet of fluff reading is like cotton candy: it will go down easy and taste good, but over time it will rot your mind. If you are going to grow up big and strong as a Christian, then you need a reading diet that is healthy. Just as it is in the food pyramid, so it is in the reading pyramid: consume very little junk food and make the majority of your reading diet one that is healthy and nourishing for your soul.

Now you might be saying to yourself: "Okay then Pastor Rob: how can I know which the worthwhile books to read are?" You go into a bookstore or do a search on Amazon and you are confronted with scores of books – how to choose? Well, I want to help you with that and this in turns brings me to my fourth point which is the Latin phrase *tolle lege*.

#### 4. Tolle Lege

*Tolle Lege* is the name of the reading program I'm officially starting today. The name comes from the conversion experience of St. Augustine of Hippo in the fourth century. In *Confessions*, Augustine's autobiography, he writes how during a period of sorrow over the sinful life he had been living up until that time, he heard a child's voice coming from a nearby house repeating over and over again, "*Tolle lege...Tolle lege...*" which means, "Take up and read." Taking it as a sign from God, Augustine grabbed a Bible and began reading at the first passage he came to, a passage from Romans 13, and immediately as a result he believed the message of the gospel and came to a saving faith in Christ.

So the reading program is an invitation to you: *Tolle lege...* "take up and read." It will work like this. Approximately every couple of months I will pick out a book that I will encourage you to *tolle lege*, take up and read. Then you'll have the next couple of months to read that book at your leisure. At the end of those two months we'll gather together on a Saturday morning here at the church to talk about what we read, ask questions, and discuss what you've learned.

Now let me be clear: these will be books of a theological nature. We're not going to do anything fluffy. As your pastor, I want to help you become familiar with great teachers of the past and present and help direct you to books that are really worth reading, books that will challenge your thinking and help you grow in your understanding of the gospel. I promise I'm not going to pick out anything that's going to be way beyond you that only Bible scholars can understand: any book I recommend will be books anybody with at least a high school education should be able to read and comprehend. But they will be books that will fill your mind and nourish your soul. The goal of this after all is to help you love God more with your mind and help you enrich and deepen your knowledge of Christ's love for you.

The books we'll read for *Tolle Lege* will be available for purchase for a couple of weeks after I announce it at the Information Table. If for some reason you can't afford it, I've got your back: you can have it for free. I don't want someone not participate who wants to because money is tight. But if you can afford it, please pay for it. You're more likely to read a book you paid good money for than one just given to you. But here's the thing: if you take one, you need to commit to read it. By taking a book, you're making a covenant with me that you are in good faith going to read it. I'm not interested in giving out books that collect dust on your shelf. *Tolle lege* means "Take, read" not "Take, leave" and never pick it up again. If you take a book, read the book.

The book we're going to begin with this summer is a short book entitled *The Bookends of the Christian Life* by Jerry Bridges and Bob Bevington. It will be available out in the lobby at the Information Table immediately after the service. If you want one, you need to simply sign your name on the clipboard indicating your commitment to read it and one will be given to you. The book is \$11. If you can pay it today, great. If you can pay it later, that's fine; bring the money with you next week. If you can't pay because money is tight, that's okay too. But again I ask that if you take one, you commit to reading it.

Then on September 9 I'll have a get together here at the church so we can have an opportunity to discuss what we've learned. I will e-mail those of you who signed up and took a book to remind you of the date as it gets close. You aren't required to come, but I think there is a value in reviewing what you've learned and sharing that with others, as well as being enriched by the insights and observations of others, so I would encourage you to attend if you can.

## 5. Objections

Now for my fifth and final point, I need to address your objections to this whole reading program I'm promoting here. There are two big ones that always come up, so let me just tackle them head-on. Here's the first:

"I don't like to read!" or "I'm no good at reading!" or "Reading always put me to sleep!" Let's be honest here: at least half of you are thinking that right now, aren't you? I hear that all the time, but this might surprise you: I totally understand that objection. If you don't read on a regular basis, reading is difficult. I don't think anyone is blowing smoke when they say that. I completely believe you when you tell me that.

But here's the thing: reading will always be difficult if you never read on a regular basis. Let's talk about running a marathon for a moment as an analogy. First, let me state that I don't run. I can barely run up and down a basketball court for ten minutes with the 5<sup>th</sup> grader I mentor at Lowell without becoming seriously winded, much less run the Boston Marathon. I'll be honest: I'm a wimp! Running is absolutely not my thing and certainly running a marathon is not in the cards for me anytime soon. But then, does that mean I can never run a marathon? Should it be my inescapable conclusion that because I can barely huff and puff my way through a short jog around my block right now that I'll never be able to run a 10K marathon? Or do you think that if I start to discipline myself to go out jogging each day, and work at it and develop my leg muscles and learn to control my breathing and push myself a little more each week to run a little further, that maybe over a few years I might be able to run in a marathon after all?

Listen: just because you aren't very good at reading now doesn't mean you can't get better. Like anything in life - be it running or playing an instrument or learning a skill - you get better by doing it. You can grow to enjoy reading and get better at it, but you need to first do it consistently in order for those mental muscles to be built up.

If you don't believe me, talk to my wife. Karen had never been much of a reader. In our first ten to twelve years of marriage, I don't think she read much more than a dozen books that whole time. But then she read a book that convicted her about lack of discipleship in her mind. She realized she needed to be more diligent in reading if she was going to love God with all of her mind. So she started reading more. She asked me for some recommendation and she started digging in. And I'll be honest: it was hard for her at first. She would get tired after reading a few pages and would have a difficult time remembering what she read. But she kept at it. Today, Karen will tell you she enjoys reading. There are nights at our home where we'll just sit together and

read. Karen's been keeping track of the books she reads and last year she read a total of 19 books and so far this year she has read 13! So you can change; you can get better at reading and even – believe it or not – enjoy reading. My wife is living proof that a person can go from not enjoying reading to having reading be a normal activity she does in her free time. Just talk to Karen and ask her about her experience.

The second objection to reading goes like this: "I just don't have the time." Once again, this objection can have some legitimacy. There are times in life when work schedules, family responsibilities, personal health reasons make finding time to read difficult. But we aren't always as busy as we make ourselves out to be because sometimes we busy ourselves with lesser things. A good way to find out how much time you have available to read is to simply tally up the time you spent last week doing things like watching TV or playing video games or being on Facebook. Chances are you weren't too busy to do at least a few hours of those things: if so, you have the time; you're just choosing to use on other things.

If that's the case, let me encourage you to turn off the TV set, put down the Xbox controller, and use some of that time you have available to you in far better ways by reading good books. I can almost virtually guarantee your mind won't be renewed by much of anything you watch on TV and you won't find many ways to love God with your mind slaying a hoard of zombies in a video game. But if you discipline yourself to set aside the time to read the books that I'm going to recommend to you, I can guarantee it will not be time wasted but rather it will enrich you and deepen your understanding of Christ and the message of the gospel.

## **Conclusion**

So then, I've laid out my argument as to why reading is important, dealt with objections, and told you the detail about *Tolle Lege*, our reading program. Now let me close with a couple of personal remarks and we'll be done.

As your pastor, I want to help you grow as Christians. I want to do all I can to help you grow more deeply in love with Jesus. And it is my conviction that one of the best way for that to happen is to encourage you to read good books – the Bible most of all, but also deep, theologically-rich books that will nourish your soul. I look back on my past twenty years of being a Christian and much of my growth can be traced back to the books I've read that have profoundly shaped my thinking. If you want to grow, you need to read. So I'm going to do all I can to help encourage that here at GBC. It is my desire to create a reading culture here, where people in this church love to read good books that challenges their minds and not just entertains them. You've seen this in me in various contexts: when I got here, I had the elders start reading books as part of our Saturday mornings together. In my Body Builder's class, you need to read in a systematic theology book in preparation for the class. With the men I've been involved in discipling, what do we do? We read books and discuss them. Do you see the pattern? I want you to read. I want to put good books in your hands and have you read them. I want to develop in you're a love for reading that you pick up books even beyond what I recommend, that in given the choice between

watching some mindless sitcom on TV and reading a book on theology you don't even have to debate what decision to make. That's my goal for you as your pastor.

But here's the thing: I can't make you do anything. All I can do is offer these things to you and challenge you: but you need to do them. As a pastor, I am not responsible for your spiritual growth: you are. All I can do is provide the means to help you grow as a disciple but you need to avail yourself to them. As the modern proverb says, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink." So it is in ministry. The books I'll recommend to you with *Tolle Lege* is the water: it is good and refreshing and nourishing for your soul, but I can't make you read them. I can't force you to turn off the TV or log out of Facebook or read while on your lunch break. You have to want it. You have to do it.

So I close with my plea to you: *Tolle lege*: take, read. Break the fast of not reading and begin to feast upon the richness of godly teachers who have written books for your benefit. Reading has renewed and transformed my mind as a Christian and it can do the same for you if you let it. Join with me in helping to make a GBC a church where we are willing to read theological books so that we might love God more deeply with all of our heart, soul, strength, and minds. Let's pray.

**This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Brethren Church of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2012.**