

I'm glad to be with you today as we launch a new series for the next leg of our vision, where we're continuing this practice of renewing the mind with the new habit of scripture. We're going to talk about this for the next five weeks. First, the year is 1999, and I am in seventh grade. It honestly was a season of life where there was much to forget. They were difficult years, as many of us have experienced. You couldn't pay me enough to go back to middle school! I was filled with angst, awkwardness, a lot of hair gel, and, of course, a puka shell necklace. For me, those years were awkward. They were difficult and filled with anger. I made life very difficult for my parents.

But it was in those years that I began to witness something in my parents that had been there, but I had just become aware of it. Every morning, I'd wake up, and it felt very early to me, a 7th grader. The sun tended to be still down, and I would walk out to the kitchen to grab my breakfast. Every day, as I walked by my parent's dining room, I would look, and at the table was my dad. He would sit there, before the sun was up, with his Bible open and his journal open, and he seemed to be in deep reflection. But every single morning, without fail, I would witness this. I'd wake up, angry and grumpy, walk down the hall, into the kitchen, and there was my dad—Bible open, journal open, in prayer for who knows how long.

But this wasn't just an isolated habit. What I began to notice in my parents was that there were habits specifically related to Scripture memorization. My dad was sneaky. In those difficult years, we had about a 15-minute ride to school, and he would have me help him practice his scripture memorization. He knew what he was doing. I still have committed many of those scriptures to my own memory. It was daily quiet time with the Lord. It was a commitment to a small group of guys and an accountability group. There were commitments and habits of local church attendance.

All of these different habits formed a life in my parents that I had not noticed before but seen now as I'm becoming awake to more mature years. See, these habits would become the formative elements of my dad's and mom's faith. It would navigate difficult years of parenting and professional change, moments where they would walk away from a successful career to start something that God had called them to do to ultimately lose much through that process.

Yet every morning my dad was at the dining room table, Bible open, journal present, praying with the Lord. I don't think he had

this language, but these habits comprise what I would now call my dad's rule of life. It was a set of habits, a set of rhythms that he would take on because he believed he had to organize his life around following Jesus. And it's in those habits that he would never have noticed the transformation in any given morning. But as the years turned to decades, slowly, you began to see my dad's life anchored in following Jesus. He had organized a way of living because he knew there would be times when his faith would falter, and he needed his habits to sustain him through that time of faltering.

It reminds me of David Brooks, who, in his book *The Second Mountain*, speaks of commitment this way. "Commitment is falling in love with something and then building a structure of behavior around it for those moments when love falters." See, the rule of life is simply this. It is a habit, a structure of behaviors that sustain our commitments when the feeling of commitment seems to falter.

As you saw in that video, we're in a multi-year vision or initiative where we're reorganizing our lives around a shared rule of life, a set of practices and habits that help us to organize our commitment to Jesus so that when we don't feel like following Jesus, which will happen often, we still have a habit, a core rhythm of life that keeps us tethered and anchored to Jesus.

If you're unfamiliar with this language of a rule of life, that's okay. Here's the best definition that we've come across. "A rule of life is a set of practices that guard our habits and guide our life" (Andy Crouch). I like that. It's simple, but profound. We believe that we are ultimately a collection of our habits, thousands and thousands of decisions that are made every single day giving shape to who you are and who you are becoming.

Many of those decisions happen unintentionally, but you actually have a rule of life, whether you know it or not. You have a rhythm. I would guess this morning probably went similar to last Sunday, which went similar to the Sunday before that: habits, rhythms, and ways in which you operate in the world that allow you to exist.

Now, the difference, at least that we believe, is that those habits, whether intentional or unintentional, are deeply shaping the person you are becoming. The goal for the followers of Jesus is to do these in an intentional way that moves us toward the way of Jesus. To be human is to change. There's no such thing as a static human. You are constantly being shaped and formed every

single day by the decisions you make and the decisions made around you. To be human is to be dynamic.

So what would it look like to be intentional about these habits in such a way that a rule of life, something designated towards the way of Jesus, guards those habits and, in turn, will guide your life towards Christ? This is what a rule of life is. So, for the past two years, we've been rolling out this rule of life for CPC. It's comprised of four different practices that we believe are part and parcel to following Jesus.

Now, there are a bunch of different ways to practice these four things, but I would argue these four things are central to any follower of Jesus. How you live them out are totally up for grabs. We're going to suggest a few things, a few ways that historically we see, from the life of Jesus, are ways to practice these things. There are a lot of different ways, and these will look different for each of us based on our life stage, our personality, and the social context in which we live. But these four practices are what we launched a couple of years ago, the first being the practice of attentiveness. We practice attentiveness in contrast to a world of distraction and hurry.

We believe that there are habits in the world that shape us, such as distraction and hurry, as well as the pace of life. I've argued that for most of us, myself included, we're simply too busy to follow Jesus. So, how do we begin by just slowing down and becoming more attentive to God? We believe two ways to do that, amongst many, are the practice of silent solitude and Sabbath. So we spent a year playing with these, figuring out if these could be ways in which we anchor our rhythms towards Jesus.

About six months ago, we launched the habit of renewing the mind. We practiced renewing the mind in contrast to a world of noise, competing narratives, and addictions. We live in the information age in which we are bombarded with all sorts of inputs that are slowly shaping our minds in a particular direction. So we're taking very seriously Paul's call to renew our minds, not being conformed to the patterns of this world, but being transformed into the way of Jesus (Romans 12).

In the fall we launched a habit of fasting. That's one of the ways that you can practice renewing the mind. And this morning, we are launching this practice of scripture, one that we're quite familiar with. We're beginning this new initiative. What does it look like to integrate the scriptures into our lives in such a way that our minds become renewed by the very story and vision of life that we witness through this library of texts we call the scriptures?

I would guess that we come to scripture, as a habit, with a deep familiarity. I would argue that there's not really anyone who would say following Jesus means we avoid the scriptures. When you think of a Christian, you assume they are someone who is going to read the Bible. But I would also argue that the scriptures

are something we bring a lot of baggage to. We bring all sorts of things to the scriptures.

One of the great gifts of my work is that I get to minister to this multi-generational church. And a few years into this, what I've begun to realize or see surface is there are generational differences on where our first step is towards the scriptures. This is in broad strokes, so there's all sorts of nuance. But one of the things I've found is that those of you in an older generation, like my dad's, came to the scriptures with a net positive view. It was an aid towards following Jesus. It's something that became core and pivotal. You came to the text and it was an easy transition from the scriptures into following Jesus.

But I believe we're actually living through a sort of transition in which the biblical trust or trust of the scriptures is eroding with younger followers of Jesus. As I sit with younger generations, the scriptures aren't a net positive. They're actually a net negative. They read stories in the Old Testament through Joshua and the conquest of Cana, and they think, isn't that just genocide in the name of God? What do we do with that? What do you do if you've read through Genesis, if you read through the Bible in a year, and you come not very far before things get really weird? I mean, the amount of sex scandals alone in the book of Genesis is a bit startling. So, for younger generations, it's not a net positive; it's actually an obstacle to it. How do we overcome some of these things?

We bring all sorts of baggage to the scriptures, but here's what I want to bring us to. This morning, I'm really just setting the table for the next four weeks. And in the next four weeks, we're going to talk about particular ways in which the scriptures renew our minds. We'll answer some of the questions or address some of those that you may have. But ultimately, reading the Bible, a life dedicated to following Jesus, and reading the scriptures will produce a lot of questions because this book is complex. It's wild and gnarly and strange. There are talking snakes on page three, and there are all sorts of scandals! There's all sorts of stuff that in the modern world, most people think, do you really base your life on a 2000-year-old text? We Christians answer yes. That actually is a little bit strange in our world today.

So what does the role of the scriptures play for us? Well first, let's define what we mean by scripture. For this series and beyond, we're defining scripture this way: Scripture is the divinely inspired library of writings, known to us as the Bible, that tells one unified story, leading to Jesus.

First, we believe this book is divinely inspired. We believe this is a book unlike any other book. God was intimately involved in its coming to fruition. Through the writings of human authors, the Apostles, and prophets, God was somehow in the mix, inspiring what we hold today as the scriptures.

We use this phrase in a library of writings very intentionally because what you find when you open the scriptures is that this book is actually a collection of books with all sorts of different genres. It has everything from ancient Hebrew poetry to letters written in the New Testament to specific churches, to narrative, to poems, to apocalyptic readings. All these different types of readings require and demand us to understand the type of thing we're dealing with.

You read the news differently than you read an email, differently than you read a movie script, differently than you read a novel, and differently than you read a textbook. The same is true of scripture. There are all sorts of different genres, a library of writings in this text that we approach with all sorts of nuance. Yet the brilliance and the beauty of the scriptures is that it begins with "in the beginning" and ends with "and they will reign forever and ever."

It seems like a story, one unified story that ultimately is leading to the person of Jesus. Jesus is the fulfillment, the culmination of all of the scriptures. So somehow, across thousands of years, these letters and these books were written. But yet through that divine inspiration from Genesis to Revelation, they tell one singular story in which all of it is leading to Jesus.

And this story is the very thing that we center and anchor our lives in. The truth is the Bible is beautiful. It's subversive. It's prophetic. It's truth. It's engaging. It's transformative. But it's also complex and written in ancient languages. There are books I fall asleep when reading because they are boring at times. It's strange. It's gnarly. It's an obstacle. All of this is in this ancient book that we call the scriptures that lives at the very center of our faith. So the question I want to ask is, why, then, in the year 2024, do we hold a high view of scripture? Why do we hold this as the center point of our faith?

I'd put it this way: We hold a high view of scripture because Jesus holds a high view of scripture, and we are followers of Jesus. We hold a high view of scripture, not because the scripture says so, although it does, but ultimately, as followers of Jesus, we are trying to become like our rabbi, our teacher, and our savior. We are walking and following, learning to take on a way of life that emulates his so that we can live that kind of life here and now. So if Jesus speaks highly of the scriptures, we speak highly of the scriptures. Listen to this from Andrew Wilson.

Ultimately, you see, our trust in the Bible stems from our trust in Jesus Christ: the man who is God, the King of the world, the crucified, risen and exalted rescuer. I don't trust in Jesus because I trust the Bible; I trust the Bible because I trust in Jesus. I love him, and I've decided to follow him, so if he talks and acts as if the Bible is trustworthy, authoritative, good, helpful, and powerful, I will, too—even if some of my questions remain unanswered or my answers remain unpopular. Wilson

Do you see the little nuance? We hold a high view of the scriptures because Jesus held an unbelievably high view of the scriptures. It is likely that he had the entire Old Testament put to memory because that was part of the educational system of the day in which young Hebrew boys would begin by putting it to memory. Jesus had it at the ready at all times. He constantly upheld his view of the scriptures. And as followers of Jesus, we mimic that by also holding a high view of the scriptures. How we come to know Jesus and what we understand about him is also from the scriptures, and that gets complex. The reality is that because Jesus holds a high view, we hold a high view.

So how then does Jesus hold this high view? That brings us to Matthew 5 beginning in verse 17. This text comes at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. It is the most brilliant sermon of all time.

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Matthew 5:17-18

Now, this phrase "law and prophets" that Jesus opened with is Jesus' way of saying the Bible of his day. He's in the New Testament, which your Bible is divided into two testaments, poorly called the Old and the New. That's actually messed with our minds a little bit. But when he says the Law and the prophets, Jesus is talking about his Bible. The Law, the word there, is Torah, which is the first five books of the Bible—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Then, when he says "the prophets," he's essentially speaking of everything else in the Old Testament.

Jesus' teachings had gained so much steam, and his call to action to live out these teachings had been so radical and subversive that people began to question him, particularly those in authority. They came to him, and Jesus said that he didn't come to abolish the Law and the prophets. The Greek word for abolish is *Kataluo*, and this could be seen as disobey, but it has more of a destructive tone. In modern parlance, we might use the word deconstruction. Jesus is saying that he didn't come to deconstruct the Bible. In response to that, he didn't come to disobey it; he didn't come to disregard it. He says, "I've come to fulfill them."

Isn't this interesting? Let's use the word disobey. That's helpful here. You would assume if Jesus says, "I didn't come to disobey the law and the prophets," his counter would be, "but to obey the law and the prophets." But Jesus doesn't say that. He says, "I've come to fulfill them." We talked about this on Palm Sunday that Jesus sees and understands the scriptures as him being the pinnacle fulfillment of everything the Old Testament was talking about.

Throughout the Old Testament, there was this story of God connecting with the people of Israel. They were struggling to get their ground as a people and follow God and so they continually failed and messed up and had to come back to God. Over and over again there's this hope that this One, this Christ, this Messiah, would come in from God and then set the tracks right and bring everything to its fulfillment.

As he read the Old Testament and studied it, he said, "I am the one who didn't come to abolish that; I'm the very fulfillment of that." If you were familiar with the Old Testament in the first century, you would've known when he said this that he was claiming to be the Christ. And Jesus says the whole thing is aimed at me. I am the embodiment of the Old Testament story. He goes on to speak about how we should then engage with this. In light of Jesus being the fulfillment of all scripture:

Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 5:19

Do you notice the play on words that Jesus does here? If you disregard the least, you will be the least. But if you practice—and I love that word—he's saying live out, attempt to organize your life around, that word is really crucial to this whole thing of a rule of life. That's what we're taking on; what does it look like to practice following Jesus? How do we actually live these commandments out as opposed to just absorbing them? And Jesus says that, "therefore anyone who sets aside the least of these commandments." What he's approaching here is a progressive vision of the scriptures in which you just accommodate it to cultural understandings.

There's more here that we can't get into, but this would be akin to Jesus' interactions with a group called the Sadducees. The Sadducees in the New Testament were a group that would tend to accommodate the scriptures. They didn't believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus because it seemed odd to them, which it should. People don't always come back from the dead, and so they said that must be some sort of myth. They would set aside a teaching like that, even though it was plain in the scripture, because they were accommodating to their culture. And Jesus says, anyone who sets aside the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great. For Jesus, it appears that there's a reciprocal relationship between how seriously one treats the Bible and their experience in the kingdom of God.

Jesus then goes on, and he's not just critiquing a progressive view of the scriptures "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law,

you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (v. 20). Jesus is now moving and critiquing the more conservative view of the scriptures that would take a hard literal reading that says the Pharisees were ones who memorized and upheld their view of scripture, but they would never let it transform them. It would never move beyond the informational and behavioral structure. I set up all these rules to guard myself. Jesus seems to be critiquing that because he says your righteousness must go beyond that of the Pharisees.

Now, what does he mean by that? What Jesus means by this is that he's saying the Pharisees' understanding of righteousness was an external thing. If you had the right view of all these things, you held fast and steady, and then this would be your righteousness. But what Jesus is about to do is go teach on the scriptures and he'll say things in verse 21 like, "you've heard that it was said, but I say to you." The Pharisees that were caught in things like, you've heard it said don't murder, so they were really good at not murdering people. But Jesus has righteousness that goes deeper, such as how to uproot the anger that's behind the murder. Jesus said to deal with that. That's a formative way of looking at the scriptures. There's something in the way of Jesus in which you can dig beneath the surface that can reform you from your inward being that uproots the anger that rules your life, and then the life that flows from that is the kingdom life.

For Jesus there seems to surface ways of reading the Bible that are not helpful, that are honestly not correct. And so if Jesus holds this high view of the scriptures and he says there has to be something more here, it has to be something deeper, what exactly is that? In John 5, Jesus answers this question, and he helps us dig a little deeper into what he means by "righteousness that goes beyond the Pharisees."

Jesus is speaking: "*You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life*" (John 5:39-40). The purpose of the scriptures is to reveal to us Jesus. And so any sort of love of the scriptures must quickly be backed by the love for Jesus. That's the ultimate goal. The goal actually is not to love the scriptures but to love Jesus.

I'm getting a bit pedantic here. Most likely those two things go hand in hand. A love of the scriptures will lead you to a love of Jesus if you allow the Holy Spirit to begin to transform you from the inside out. Ultimately, the Bible is a means to an end. And the end is to know Christ and to grow in Christlikeness.

Jesus says, "You love the scriptures. You think in them they have eternal life. You forget they all point to me." In Jesus is where you find eternal life. The scriptures are meant to bring us before Jesus. I don't know how you follow Jesus without the scriptures, so just know that my cards are on the table. That's how we know Jesus, that's how we're guided by Jesus, how we understand who

Jesus is, what he's on about, and how we as Christians come to him. But the point is to love Jesus. This is the goal. This is the way in which the scriptures lead us towards Christ.

Robert Mulholland, in his great book called *Shaped by the Word*, offers a framework and a paradigm. I'm going to run through this quickly as we close. He says, "How do we approach the scriptures in this way?" He suggests that there's a difference between informational reading and formational reading. Informational reading is not bad. I do it every single day, particularly with my job. I constantly read the Bible for information to understand the ancient world and to understand the teachings of Jesus at a more informational level. I read to understand the world, to understand the church, all these sorts of things. But informational reading is, on some level, a pursuit of facts and information. It's details; it tends to be linear, where you're just trying to get from one point to the next. However, I would suggest that informational reading is not bad; rather, it is important that informational modes of reading the Bible should always give way to formational modes of encounters with the God in the Bible.

Information helps us understand who we're communing with, but ultimately, formational reading is where we're meeting with the living God. It is where we understand this text as the living Word of God who meets us where we are and doesn't just want to dump information into our brain. God actually desires to transform the inner dynamics of our heart posture towards the scriptures.

Formational reading is different. It's encountering God in the text. It's believing that this Word is living and active, as sharp as a double-edged sword. It's cutting away at the things that counter our pursuit of Jesus. It's a way in which we view the scriptures as authoritative, and that's not a word we like in the modern world. As Christians, we come to the text as the voice of God, authoritative for all living in Christlikeness. It's a way of understanding that God is speaking to us through the scriptures. It's a way that we come in a formational mode where we subject and submit ourselves to Jesus, believing that these words bring us closer to who Christ is and ultimately shape us into Christlikeness.

That's the framework: informational versus formational. Here's the paradigm that I want to present to you. Many of you already have a beautiful submission to scripture, and I encourage you to continue with that. But if you're brand new to the Bible, though, this paradigm could be a helpful way to start. There are three simple steps: approach, encounter, and respond. This comes from Robert Mulholland's book *Shaped by the Word*. And what he suggests is that all formational modes of reading begin with our approach. We cannot, as Christians, come to this believing that it is held accountable to our understanding of it. Our approach to the scripture is one of humility. It's one of coming under the text instead of coming over the text.

Often, in informational modes of reading, we seek to master the text, but in formational reading, we want the text to master us. Do you see the difference? So, the approach is what we would call cultivating an attitude of prayer and humility towards the scripture.

One of the problems and the things that I step into when I speak with younger generations is they begin with that sort of net negative view of the scriptures. It tends to be a posture in which they believe they know what's right in the world. And I have to graciously invite them into saying, what if the scriptures were more true than you realized? What would it look like to humbly submit ourselves to the text and cultivate, not a power over but an under focus, in which the text speaks to us? Robert Mulholland wrote:

We cannot view our spiritual reading of scripture as a means to any goal of our own devising. It must be a steady, consistent discipline we offer to God with no strings attached, no demands made, no expectations fixed, no limits set. We simply offer it for God's use or nonuse...In our spiritual reading of scripture we become available to God, open to the penetration of God's living Word and responsive to the shaping of God's will for our wholeness and life. Mulholland

Approach

This first step, approach, is really important. It's where we pray and offer our lives to God and say, "There are areas of my life that don't align with where you would desire me to live. Lord, I'm coming to the scriptures with an open hand saying, God, would you teach me? Would you allow me to be like you? That is my deepest desire." So, in this approach, we focus on developing and cultivating humility before the text.

Encounter

Second, encounter. This is the area most of us are familiar with. Encounter simply means opening our lives to meet God in and through the scriptures. This can be anything from reading a daily Bible plan to praying through the Psalms, to the sacred reading of *Lectio Divina*, and different practices of meditating on scriptures and contemplating the scriptures. There's just many different ways in which you can encounter God in the scriptures, but the focus in formational reading is coming to the text to say, "I'm ready to encounter God in the text." Not just extrapolate information but encounter the living God in the scriptures. We will talk a lot about this later, particularly in the practice labs, which are all developed on different ways we encounter God in the text—listening, studying, memorizing, and contemplating.

Response

Then, the last step is response. In response, we simply try to integrate our encounter with God into the daily contours of our lives. In an informational mode, you're taking the information

you gather and you're using it for a different purpose. Not necessarily bad, but if we're trying to allow the scriptures to be the place where we interact and commune with God and have him transform us from the inside out, then the response is asking the question: God, what would change out of my encounter with you? What is it that you desire? What's the invitation as I've met you in the text? Is it a false truth that I believe that I need to disregard? Is it an action you're calling me to? Is it a slowing down and a meditation on who you are, something to believe about who I am and how you've created me?

Response forces us to slow down and not just ask God to give us the details, but rather ask God what he is speaking to our hearts. Often this can happen in a lot of different ways. For me, I've tried to cultivate a habit of journaling that allows me to pray out my thoughts, to write down scripture. The best thing about journaling with scripture is that it slows me down where I have to think about what I'm processing. So that's one way.

Approach, encounter, response is this threefold rhythm in which we take our practice of scripture and come before God, asking him to shape us and change us more and more into his image. This is the goal of all reading for the follower of Jesus: that we would not set aside the least command; Jesus instructed us on that. But also allowing our righteousness to go beyond and deeper than the simple surface level understanding of the text as they transform us into Christlikeness. To close, let me read this quote from Eugene Peterson in his great but somewhat difficult book, *Eat This Book*.

Christians feed on scripture. Holy scripture nurtures the holy community as food nurtures the human body. Christians don't simply learn or study or use scripture; we assimilate it, take it into our lives in such a way that it gets metabolized into acts of love, cups of cold water, missions into all the world, healing and evangelism and justice in Jesus' name, hands raised in adoration of the Father, feet washed in company with the Son. Peterson

I love the way Peterson says, "We assimilate it, take it into our lives in such a way that it gets metabolized into..." So, we, as followers of Jesus, uphold this book. For the next four weeks, we're going to look at the different ways in which this book could offer a renewal of our minds, a way in which we disregard the lies and the narratives that have shaped us into something other than Christ. And we come under it, we submit to it and say, "Lord, would you meet us in this text and shape us deeply into the people that you desire us to be?"

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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