Meditation and the Word

**NOTE to person who enters this in Moodle:** In the “Before Class Section” put an assignment in there that says to start the Spiritual Disciplines Journal before class, since it is an all week exercise. This will be true of every journal in this class.

Meditation and the Word

By Bruce Long

Week 1

Hopefully, by now you have completed the spiritual discipline journals on Meditation and the journals on the Word. Although those are not required to do the journals for this class, this series of journals is a next step—combining Meditation and the Word.

The journals on Meditation defined it very simply: meditation is “focusing in on listening to God.” For the discussion in these journals, we are going to expand that definition to match Richard Foster’s definition in his book, *Celebration of Discipline:* “Christian meditation, very simply, is the ability to hear God’s voice and obey his word. It is that simple. I wish I could make it more complicated for those who like things difficult. It involves no hidden mysteries, no secret mantras, no mental gymnastics, no esoteric flights into the cosmic consciousness” (Foster 17).

When it comes to hearing God’s voice, the clearest, most certain place to go is to God’s Word—the Bible. That is why this series of journals will be focused on *memorizing* scripture. Memorization is “hiding God’s Word in your heart” (Psalm 119:11). With God’s Word hidden in your heart, you will be able to meditate on it anytime and anywhere. Furthermore, with God’s Word memorized, the Holy Spirit can use it to prompt you to obedience. If you need more convincing on this, take a look at this 5 minute excerpt from a sermon of John Piper: <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/if-my-words-abide-in-you--2> .

Let’s begin by talking about the “elephant in the room”: I hate memorization! Had that thought already crossed your mind? Memorization is the kind of hard mental work that requires focus in a world full of distractions. It is not easy, but it is worth it. I will try to structure the task to make it as easy as possible, but it will take a commitment on your part. You will do best if you follow the instructions in these journals explicitly.

You may be tempted to cram the journal activity into one day—**don’t to it!** Start it the first day of each week and do it 4-6 days of the week.

As a part of this journal series you are going to get to choose some passages to memorize, but I’m going to start by prescribing a couple passages. The first passage to memorize is Colossians 1:9a-12:

We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, 10so 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, 11being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, 12and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. (NIV)

I promised to make this easier for you, right? That is why I am asking you to start out with a prayer from the Bible. Memorizing this passage will double as your prayer time for people you love this week. Read that passage over again. Isn’t that a perfect prayer for just about anyone? So, here is the plan.

1. Choose the Bible translation you prefer to use for memorization.
2. Write the passage on a card, put it in your phone as the background, or put it wherever you need it to be, so that it will constantly be available to you.
3. Now, set aside two times per day to use this prayer to pray for several people who are important to you. Include your minister, family members, etc. Just say, “God, I pray Colossians 1:9-12 for \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ .” Then pray the scripture.
4. It will be most effective if you read it out loud. That gets more senses involved. As a matter of fact, if you can include a picture (of a person or thing that matches the words for you) with the text of the verse, it will actually help you to memorize it.
5. One other time during each day take two minutes to review the passage. No more. Short, frequent sessions are best for memorization that “sticks.”
6. After the second day, you should try praying without having the words in front of you for some of the people you pray for. It’s okay if you don’t get it exactly right. Doing this will give you a sense of how well you are memorizing it. It will also help you learn it quicker, since your brain will be working to retrieve the words when they are not in front of you.
7. For additional review, write a text to someone you prayed for and tell that person you prayed this passage over them—then type it out from memory!
8. Do this for at least five days.

**Your Journal Entry**:

You will be making journal entries each week. You will submit the journal as a Word document here. It is fine to use a paper journal or write on your phone, but you will need to move those entries into a Word document. Enter these items in your journal:

1. Type in the passage from your chosen translation. Try typing it from memory and see how you do.
2. What two times each day did you choose to pray this scripture prayer for people you know?
3. Reflect on your experience this week praying scripture over people.

Week 2

This is a low-information week, because the bulk of your time should be spent on memorizing. I am going to add one more passage for you to memorize this week, but you will also keep reviewing last week’s passage. Let’s get right to it.

I am adding Philippians 4:4-7 for you to memorize:

4Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! 5Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. 6Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (NIV)

If you want an extra blessing, add verses 8 and 9, but this passage stands powerfully by itself.

Here is the procedure for this week:

1. Just like last week, write Philippians 4:4-7 on a card, put it in your phone as the background, or put it wherever you need it to be that it will constantly be available to you. Add an appropriate picture if you are a visual learner.
2. Choose one time during the day that you are going to spend five minutes memorizing Philippians 4:4-7. Hold yourself accountable by putting this time in your journal.
3. If you use a smart device, put a reminder on it to cue you to stop for five minutes to review the passage.
4. During your selected time, read the passage out loud three times while focusing on the words. Then cover the passage and try to say it out loud. ***Do not peek at the passage when saying it from memory. Let your brain work to do the best it can.*** Repeat for five minutes but no longer.
5. Each evening while lying in bed review the verse in your head. Try to get through the whole thing. If you can only remember a phrase, meditate on that phrase like the Psalmist who said, “When I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night.” (Ps. 63:6, ESV)
6. Repeat that process every day: practice during the day and meditate using that verse in bed at night.
7. Continue to pray at least once each day for people on your prayer list using Colossians 1:9-12. You should be able to do it without your card, but it is okay to check it on occasion to be sure you are getting it exactly right. This review is important for you to be able to retain and retrieve this memory over time.

Let me give you some hints for memorizing scripture.

* It is important to have the reference and the first few words of the passage locked into your mind together. One of the things I have done when starting to memorize a passage is first repeat out loud several times the reference and the first few words: e.g. “Colossians 1:9-12, We continually ask God….” Sometimes the hurdle to getting started is getting started. Work on getting the opening locked into your memory. It will serve you well.  
    
  Yes, knowing the reference is critical. If you quote a passage when you pray for someone or use a passage like Philippians 4:4-7 to counsel someone, you want to be able to point them right to where it is in God’s Word.
* **DO NOT resort to cramming on one day of the week!** That is not the way to help your brain get the words into long-term memory and maintain the ability to retrieve it when you need it. Short study periods, done across time will serve you the best. Take those five minutes per day at least five days each week. It will work. *(You also should know that this works when studying material for tests!)*
* Do your five minutes of review in different places. Some recent reading I have done suggests that memories are better retained and retrieved when reviewed in different environments. That way a memory does not get “locked in” to a particular setting.
* If you want to accelerate your memorization, plan to hand the passage to someone else, quote the verses verbatim, and let that person check you.

**Your Journal Entry**:

Time to add to your journal. Enter these items in your journal:

1. If you did not get it done at the start of the week, write down the time you decided to review the Philippians 4:4-7 passage.
2. How many days did you actually take those five minutes to review?
3. Tell the story of your meditation on Philippians 4:4-7 at night. Were you able to recall most of the words? Did it relax you? Did you fall asleep doing it? Did you find that it settled any anxieties from your day? There is no right answer here, just reflect on how it went.
4. Could you easily pray Colossians 1:9-12 for people straight from memory or did you need to check your card/phone for some words? Again, there is no right answer, except to reflect on how it is going.
5. Choose two more verses/passages to memorize during the rest of this class and record them here.

Week 3:

This week I would like you to add your two passages to this routine.

1. Continue last week’s routine:
   1. Continue to pray for at least one person a day using Colossians 1:9-12. Do it from memory. If you feel uncertain as to how well you remember the text, just keep praying and review the verses later.
   2. During your selected time, read Philippians 4:4-7 out loud three times while focusing on the words. Then cover the passage and try to say it out loud. ***Do not peek at the passage when saying it from memory. Let your brain work to do the best it can.*** Repeat for five minutes but no longer. If you already have it memorized with confidence, just say it out loud once or twice to reinforce it in your mind.
2. Now add your selected verses to the routine.
   1. Select another time during the day to work on the verses you selected. Set up a reminder in your phone if that helps you.
   2. Just like before, write the two passages on a card, put them in your phone as the background, or put it wherever you need it to be constantly available to you. Add an appropriate picture if you are visual.
   3. During this second selected five minutes, read your passages out loud three times while focusing on the words. Then cover it and try to say it out loud. ***Do not peek at the passages when saying them from memory. Let your brain work to do the best it can.*** Repeat for five minutes but no longer.
   4. Now when you are in bed at night, choose one or all of the verses to review in your head. Choose one each night to focus in on and think about more deeply.

**Your Journal Entry:**

Time to reflect. Enter these items in your journal:

1. How many days did you actually take those five minutes twice each day to review?
2. Tell the story of your meditation on the different passages at night. Were you able to recall most of the words? Did it relax you? Did you fall asleep doing it? Did you find that it settled any anxieties from your day? Did it prompt prayer? Where did your thoughts go? There is no right answer here, just reflect on how it went.
3. On a scale of 1 to 10, rank how well you feel like you have each passage memorized. Write each passage reference in your journal and give it a ranking. A “1” means you can barely think of the first word. A “10” means you have it “cold.”

Week 4:

This week is mostly a week for reinforcing all the verses in your memory and keeping them retrievable (two different brain processes). Follow last weeks procedure, but you will only use one five-minute period each day to practice the three passages.

1. Continue to pray for at least one person a day using Colossians 1:9-12. Do it from memory. If you feel some uncertainty, just keep praying and check the verses later for review.
2. During your selected time, read each of your three passages out loud three times while focusing on the words. Then cover the passage and try to recite it out loud. ***Do not peek at the passage when saying it from memory. Let your brain work to do the best it can.*** Repeat for five minutes but no longer. If you already have it memorized with confidence, just say it out loud once or twice to reinforce it in your mind.
3. Now when you are in bed at night, choose one or all of the verses to review in your head. Choose one each night to focus in on and think about more deeply.

The one thing I would like to add this week is a few more words about meditation. Let’s go back to Foster’s definition:“Christian meditation, very simply, is the ability to hear God’s voice and obey his word. It is that simple. I wish I could make it more complicated for those who like things difficult. It involves no hidden mysteries, no secret mantras, no mental gymnastics, no esoteric flights into the cosmic consciousness” (17).

So far we have been focused in on “hearing God’s voice” by committing His Word to memory. Note, however, that it also includes “obey his word.” Let’s add that extra dimension to meditation this week. Up until now, you have been doing a kind of “free form” meditation reviewing these verses in your mind in bed before going to sleep. Let’s build on that.

This week, as you meditate on the verses in bed, select one verse as usual to focus on. This time, however, ask some obedience questions:

1. **Is there something in the verse I need to obey?** (Mull this over. Don’t answer too quickly or you might miss something.)
2. **What does obedience to this verse look like in my life?** (Let this get personal between you and God. Don’t settle with a general answer about how “people” should obey this verse. Ask God to help you understand how *you* should obey.)

Try to do this at least four times this week—once for each passage.

One more thing…if you find that you go to sleep so fast that you rarely get very far with the nighttime meditation, you should feel free to choose another time during the day to take about five minutes for this exercise. Maybe add it to the end of your regular prayer time. Memorization has a blessing all its own, but I don’t want you to miss out on the richness that comes from mediating on God’s Word.

**Your Journal Entry:**

Write your reflections. Enter these items in your journal:

1. How many days did you actually take those five minutes each day to review?
2. Reflect on praying Colossians 1:9-12 for others. Any particular thoughts? Have you focused in on some particular people for whom you think this prayer is most appropriate? Has God blessed you by hearing back from someone you have been praying for?
3. Tell the story of your meditation on the different passages at night. Did you find something to obey? Did God show you personally how you should obey? Share as much as you feel comfortable sharing here.
4. On a scale of 1 to 10, rank how well you feel like you have each passage memorized. Write each passage reference in your journal and give it a ranking. A “1” means you can barely think of the first word. A “10” means you have it “cold.”

Week 5

For this week, I am going to assume that you have memorized the four passages and can say them easily without reference to any notes. If not, please keep doing the five-minute reviews at least four times this week.

The focus this week will be on the meditation aspect. I would like to consider briefly a struggle I had with meditation in the beginning. Richard Foster sums it up nicely in *Celebration of Discipline:*

Whenever the Christian idea of meditation is taken seriously, there are those who assume it is synonymous with the concept of meditation centered in Eastern religions. In reality, the two ideas stand worlds apart. Eastern meditation is an attempt to empty the mind; Christian meditation is an attempt to fill the mind. The two ideas are quite different (Foster 20).

Maybe this is not an issue for you, but I grew up thinking meditation was all about Eastern religions, like Buddhism. Meditation felt a little scary to me.

Do you see how what we have been doing is Christian meditation rather than Eastern meditation? The intent of combining meditation and the Word is to fill your mind with God’s Word as a focal point to hearing God’s voice—and obeying. That is good, right?

Another thing to understand about meditation is that you can only learn it by doing it. There are good books that can provide insight. Resources like these can help, but you will only learn it by doing it. Here is where discipline comes in as well. You will probably not gain the riches of meditation until you have done it long enough to get comfortable with it. That is why these journals are more focused on *doing* than on *explanation*.

I know I have quoted Richard Foster exclusively in these journals. He is not *the* expert or *the* best, but he is the one who introduced me to spiritual disciplines. I tend to go back to his writing when I think about spiritual disciplines. So, I want to give you one more quote from *Celebration of Discipline* to guide this week’s meditation practice. This one is less about what Richard Foster writes and more about observing Jesus.

There is the freedom to be alone, not in order to be away from people but in order to hear the divine Whisper better. Jesus lived an inward “heart solitude.” He also frequently experienced outward solitude. He inaugurated his ministry by spending forty days alone in the desert (Matt. 4:1–11). Before he chose the twelve he spent the entire night alone in the desert hills (Luke 6:12). When he received the news of John the Baptist’s death, he “withdrew from there in a boat to a lonely place apart” (Matt. 14:13). After the miraculous feeding of the five thousand Jesus “went up into the hills by himself...” (Matt. 14:23). Following a long night of work, “in the morning, a great while before day, he rose and went out to a lonely place...” (Mark 1:35). When the twelve returned from a preaching and healing mission, Jesus instructed them, “Come away by yourselves to a lonely place” (Mark 6:31). Following the healing of a leper Jesus “withdrew to the wilderness and prayed” (Luke 5:16). With three disciples he sought out the silence of a lonely mountain as the stage for the transfiguration (Matt. 17:1–9). As he prepared for his highest and most holy work, Jesus sought the solitude of the garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36–46). I could go on, but perhaps this is sufficient to show that the seeking out of solitary places was a regular practice for Jesus. So it should be for us (97).

Up until now, your times of meditation have been done in brief periods, usually a few minutes before falling asleep at night. What do you notice about the times of meditation that Foster highlights in Jesus’ life? It appears to me that Jesus made a point on some occasions to get away alone for a longer period of time to pray and meditate.

That is what I want you to try this week. Continue doing whatever review of the passages you think you need to do to lock them in. Continue praying Colossians 1:9-12 as you desire. That is up to you. **The key experience for this week is to get 30 minutes alone to meditate**.

Pick a time. Find a place where you can be alone (hopefully a quiet, positive place). Spend 30 minutes walking (possibly while actually walking) through a time of extended meditation:

1. Work through each of the memorized passages again. Ask these questions (*you should write or print them out to take with you*):
   1. Is there something in the verse I need to obey?
   2. What does obedience to this verse look like in my life?
   3. Do you hear God giving you guidance for anything you are facing in life?
   4. Is there a depth of meaning here that you want to explore in deeper study? Don’t get distracted by it—write it down to come back to another time. Study is different than meditation.
   5. Did thinking deeply about these words of Scripture bring a person(s) to your mind? If so, write down a name and ask God to show you if there is something you need to give or to receive from that person.
2. If the four passages do not fill your time, add Philippians 4:8-9 to your meditation: “*8Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. 9Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you*.” (NIV)
3. You probably noted a couple times where you might need to write something down. It is a good idea to take something for journaling. Record other thoughts as they come to you, so that you can piece them together in your journal entry for this week.

**Your Journal Entry:**

Reflect on your extended meditation experience. Enter these items in your journal:

1. Record the day and time you did the 30-minute meditation exercise. (If you were unable to get it done, then complete this journal by sharing what hindered you. Your instructor may be able to help. Conclude by stating a day and time you will do the exercise in the next week.)
2. Assuming you were able to experience the 30 minutes of meditation, simply reflect on it. Describe how it went—was it hard? Easy? Dull? Exhilarating? Too long? Too short? What did God show you? Share any of your notes from the experience. Were you prompted to any action? This reflection is between you and God; just let your thoughts flow.

Week 6

This week there is no assigned experience. If you have done everything in this series of journals up until now, you have worked hard. This week is a time for reflection. Go to your journal 2 or 3 times this week to reflect. Here are some prompts.

1. How do you feel about memorizing scripture after the past few weeks? Did you feel like you got them all memorized well? If not, did you follow the directions closely?
2. If you were to continue memorizing scripture as a regular part of your personal growth, how do you think you would go about it? There is no set way—you could follow the pattern here the first week of every month or do something like using a memorization app on your smartphone (there are many) to help you. I had a friend who had about 100 verses written out on a big poster in front of his treadmill. He regularly ran and reviewed. Be creative.
3. Do you think you want to try doing some regular scripture memorization? If so, it would probably work best to get a partner to do it with you. Sharing something new makes it easier to get started. Who might you ask?
4. Was meditation easier for you when you had God’s Word right there in your head? Did you find that you would pause and think about those words at different times throughout the day? Did you end up quoting any of these passages to someone during the past six weeks?
5. Do you feel comfortable with meditation?
6. Do you think you will continue making meditation a regular part of your walk with God? How?
7. What was the greatest benefit you gained from the past six weeks?

If for some reason you did not do the 30-minutes exercise last week, you should do it this week. Use the prompts from last week to add your reflection to this journal entry.

May you grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Bruce Long