

An Atmosphere of Truth, Part 1

Ephesians 5:18

July 19, 2015

I don't expect you to remember the question I asked a couple of weeks ago at the end of the sermon. That was ages ago, right? But just as a reminder, we finished a short little study of the one another commands in the New Testament as part of our larger series on local church membership and involvement which unexpectedly has turned into a three-months series. We're going to end that next week. We'll bring it to an end and get back to our exposition of Luke.

But we were going through the one another commands, and we spent about three weeks on that. We divided the one another commands in the New Testament according to internal attitudes and external actions. Internal attitudes: We're to love one another, we're to be humble with one another, we're to strive for unity with one another. Those are one another commands in

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the New Testament and they have to do with our internal attitudes. External actions: They're to be about reinforcing the truth with each other, honoring others, they're honoring one another, serving one another, and then dealing with sin with one another. That's, we had to give a little short treatment to the dealing with sin part, but I, I promise you we'll come back to that again and again in the ministry here.

But we, the way we organized our little study of the one another commands, they really gave us seven categories of one another. Seven categories, right? We're to love one another, we're to humble ourselves before one another, we're to be united with one another, we're to reinforce the truth with one another, honor one another, serve one another, deal with sin with one another. So for the sake of simplicity, let's turn each one of those seven one another, those little phrases, into single words, just to summarize, okay? So we've got love, humility, unity, truth, honor, service, and let's call it reconciliation, that's what dealing with sin with one another is about, it's reconciliation.

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So back to the question I asked you at the end of the sermon two weeks ago, which one of those seven is most fundamental? Which is most foundational? Now, what I, what I did not ask is which one of these is most important. Okay? If we're trying to figure out relative importance, then I think we're in for a bit of a tussle. We're going to be arm wrestling one another, okay?

The relational types are going to say it's love. Love is the most important, and they've got 1 Corinthians 13 on their side, right? I mean, the love chapter tends to trump all arguments, right? Love one another. The meek among us, the most meek among us, are going to say humility because God, after all, "gives grace to the humble." But they're not going to argue about it, they're too meek for that. So that's good.

Ecumenical types are going to point to unity. Unity and they'll quote Rodney King at you, "Can't we all just get along?" You know, unity has got to be the thing, but again, they can't argue either because that causes division. So we can overcome them. Intellectual types are going to give you a ten-page

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polemic on why truth is the most important issue. Truth people usually have no problem arguing the point, do they? For the grandparents and the parents among us, honor sounds like the most important virtue. Nursery workers will tell you that serving one another is the most important of all. They need the help. All the counseling types are going to make a strong push for reconciliation, dealing with sin with one another.

But listen, we can avoid the banter. We can spare ourselves the tug of war because I didn't ask which one of those seven, love, humility, unity, truth, honor, service, reconciliation is the most important, but which is the most foundational. And that is a different question. Which one of those seven gives rise to, which one undergirds, all the rest of the others? Which one is the fertile soil out of which all the others grow? What nurtures, strengthens, informs, and edifies the outworking of all the one another commands? Well, when the question is framed that way, it's got to be truth, right? It's got to be truth. It's got to be reinforcing the truth with one another.

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When you think about that, that makes good sense, doesn't it? We only know love because it was revealed to us in the truth. It was revealed to us by God in the truth of his Word. We only know love as it's defined by God's Word, when we see how it's exercised first and foremost with God toward us in Christ, right? Same thing with humility. We only learn humility when we see ourselves reflected in the mirror of God's holy Word, divine truth. When we see how small and sinful we are, and in contrast when we see how great and holy God is. That's humbling to us. We only learn when we see ourselves and our God in the Word of Truth.

Unity, likewise, comes when we are of the same mind with one another. Our minds become of one accord when we're all submitting our thinking to the revealed truth of the Bible; one authority, one perspective, given from God in heaven, that's true unity down to the very core and then bubbling up from that to cover everything in our life. It's the same thing with honor, service, reconciliation. If we practice any of those apart from the truth, they are perverted and distorted, too. Honor is twisted into subservience and flattery, which you can see in the cultures of the East. Service is twisted by short-sighted

compassion, and it results in social justice projects to satisfy mere temporal needs.

Apart from the truth, there is no reconciliation; there is no dealing with sin. Those who reconcile can only do so in submission to one law-giver and one judge, standing together with the person they need to be reconciled with before the bar of God's holy justice, conducting reconciliation in submission to one truth. Informed by his truth, though, we have the hope of real and profound, meaningful reconciliation to repair any damage caused by our sin against one another.

Informed by his truth, we learn, we learn what loving, sacrificial service looks like; how to serve one another in ways that God will make effective. Informed by his truth, we not only learn what true honor is; we find out what's truly honoring, we practice that. Without truth, we are adrift in a sea of subjectivity, at the mercy of the most dominant personalities and people among us. But submitted to the truth, we stand fast, firmly fixed, anchored in to the unchanging, immoveable, all-powerful Word of God.

His Word is the final authority; it's the objective standard. It's that which teaches and sanctifies us. There got to be a continuity between what we believe and what we practice, what we understand, and how we live. You can't obey what you don't understand. You can't practice what hasn't been preached and then absorbed. That's why reinforcing the truth is the most foundational, the most fundamental of all the one another commands. Okay, that's my case. That's the case I'm making. I know some of you had different answers, and that's okay. That's what, that's my case that's how I've thought it through.

So just with all that as, as an introduction this morning, I want to think a bit more about how we practically reinforce the truth with one another. Such a vital point, I want to break it out into its own sermon. Yeah, it's actually going to be two sermons. We're gonna cover the ground in two points, that's actually gonna be two sermons. You can see the points in your outline there. How to assimilate the truth, and how to reinforce the truth. How to assimilate the truth, and how to reinforce the truth. We're just going to cover one of those points today. We'll do the next one next week to close out the series.

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Turn in your Bibles to a text we've looked at before, Ephesians 5:18. Ephesians 5:18 and just as the question we're going to ask this morning: How do we assimilate the truth? How do we assimilate the truth? If the Lord wants anything for his people, it's this: Be saturated with the revealed Word of God. How do we take it in, then? How do we incorporate the truth into our lives?

We need to listen to the truth, read the truth, study the truth, memorize the truth, meditate on the truth, obey the truth. Jesus said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" It is written; what is it written? Where is written? Why it's back in Deuteronomy 8:3. Jesus was saturated with the Word of God, and he went back in his contest with the devil, at his temptation, he went back to quote Scripture to the devil.

God had humbled Israel in the wilderness, let his people hunger and thirst so that he could feed them with manna, so that they might know, Deuteronomy 8:3, "that man does not live by

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bread but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." Life by his Word. Life and God's Word, you keep those closely connected in your mind.

That revealed Word, like all Scripture, comes directly from God. 2 Timothy 3:16, the word is *theopneustos*. *Theopneustos*, God breathed literally. It's breathed out from God, and since it comes directly from God, it will teach you. It will reprove you. It will correct you, will train you in righteousness. Do you want that? Is that what you seek? All true Christians do. They know they're ignorant without God's Word, so they want to be taught. They know they err, so they want to be reprov'd. They know they stray, so they want to be corrected. And since they hunger and thirst for righteousness, all true Christians seek to be trained for righteousness.

Understanding God's Word, then, is the most essential, most fundamental thing. As we already said, it informs, it edifies, it strengthens, it guides, all the one another of the New Testament, as well as every Christian virtue we *didn't* cover in the one another and every command that we're responsible to

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obey. That's why Peter said, 1 Peter 2.2, "Like newborn infants, long for the pure milk of the Word, that by it you may grow up into salvation."

Ever watched a newborn baby when it's feeding time? That cute, pink, cuddly little baby becomes a piranha. It cannot be satisfied until it, gives, gets that life-giving milk. Beloved, that's how we're to long for God's Word. We need its life-giving nectar so desperately. So we need to assimilate it. We need to imbibe it. We need to digest it. We need to absorb it into our bloodstream. You need to, Colossians 3:16, you need to, "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." Richly! Which is really a parallel concept that helps us understand what it is to be filled with the Spirit.

Take a look, then, at Ephesians 5:18, "Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit." You say, it didn't say anything about a marijuana. Can we smoke marijuana? No, Colorado, you cannot smoke marijuana. I don't care if it's legal, you cannot do that. Think about it,

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this isn't, this isn't just about imbibing intoxicating substances, wine, drugs, whatever.

Wine, here, in the text, is a metaphor. It's a particular figure of speech that we call synecdoche, where the part represents the whole, or vice versa. So in this case, wine represents anything that intoxicates. Anything that alters brain function because it diminishes the ability to do what? To think. To communicate. To receive truth. To practice truth.

Now I don't want to push the metaphor too far, but it is biblical to protect our minds from anything that intoxicates, from anything that could diminish its function, its capacity, its ability to think, to process, to analyze, to make wise decisions. Solomon's mother told him in the Proverbs, "It's not for kings to drink wine, Solomon. It's not for rulers to drink strong drink; otherwise, they might drink and pervert justice."

So kings, authorities, ought not to drink. That's what he's telling, that's what she's telling her son; it's very wise advice from a wise mother. So you're not to drink wine or to

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smoke marijuana. Good for you, okay? You don't do that. But are you dulling your brain in other ways? Through television? Other forms of visual entertainment. Are you filling your days with activity that just is trivial? Activity that just occupies all your time so you have no time or energy left to think?

Some people engage in mind-numbing activity, occupying themselves with just unprofitable busyness that just leaves no time to read, to study, to think, to meditate, to ponder. Others, especially among the young, they dull their brains with video games, distract themselves by surfing the web, Facebooking, Googling, flitting between tantalizing bits of trivia, information, news stories, and they are unwittingly distracting themselves to death.

Listen if we're going to assimilate the truth, if we're going to take seriously what the Bible commands us to do, we're going to have to make some choices, aren't we? You can't have it both ways. You can't indulge in the distracting enticements of the world and that not have an effect on you. I'm talking about the non-sinful pleasures. I'm talking about non-sinful pastimes.

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Just these things are permissible. These things are lawful for us as Christians. But you can't indulge in those things and still effectively assimilate God's truth into your life to transforming effect. You will be stunted.

We need to be aware of the cultural forces that are stacked against us, to fight, to assimilate the truth. And that's really what this morning is about. I want to commend assimilating the truth to you, and I want to make you aware of a couple of forces that are stacked against you, such as worldly culture, culture either that's a challenge to us. There are assumptions and expectations that have arisen within evangelical culture that hinder our assimilation of the truth as well.

But I want to start first with the wider culture, particularly in these rapidly changing times. The blazing speed with which technological advancement has hit the culture. There's an author named Nicholas Carr. He's not a Christian, very insightful writer, though, very insightful thinker. He writes about the effects of technology and modern media on our ability to think.

In an article, article entitled, *Is Google Making Us Stupid?* He, he provides a bit of personal testimony as he opens the article. He says this, quote, "Over the past few years, I have had an uncomfortable sense that someone or something has been tinkering with my brain, re-mapping the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory. My mind isn't going, as far as I can tell, but it's changing. I'm not thinking the way I used to think.

"I can feel it most strongly when I'm reading. Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be easy. My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I would sit hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That's rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration starts to drift after two or three pages. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel as if I'm always dragging my wayward brain back to the text.

The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle. I think I know what's going on. For more than a

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decade, now, I've been spending a lot of time online, searching and surfing, and sometimes adding to the great databases of the Internet." Later on in the article, he says, "I'm not the only one. When I mention," troubles, "my troubles with reading to friends and acquaintances—literary types, most of them—many say they're having similar experiences. The more they use the web, the more they have to fight to stay focused on long pieces of writing." End quote.

For all of us living in the information age, that right there is a testimony of shared experience, isn't it? We all get that. We all know exactly what he's talking about. And it's not just online reading, surfing, and browsing that's diminishing our ability to focus. It's all the modern forms of media and entertainment. I alluded to it last, just a little bit ago, about distracting ourselves to death; that's a little take on the title from Neil Postman's famous book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. He was talking about the effect of television on news; news media and how we take in media. It changes us. It changes the way we think, and our brains have adapted to the way our culture now distributes and consumes information.

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By God's design, our brains, the most complex organ in our bodies, the neural pathways and synapses in the brain can change based on external influences. Might be organic factors, like injury and disease, but most commonly it's inorganic influences, things we watch, things we read, things we react to emotionally, things we think about the most, what we put before our eyes, what we listen to.

Our brains react to those things. They change to adapt our neural pathways and synapses to a flow of stimuli, whatever that stimuli is. Now God designed it that way because he wants our minds to be renewed by the truth of his Word. If our minds can never change, if our brains are static, organs there's no change to them, there is no hope for renewing our minds because our spirit uses our brain to think. However that works, I don't know; it's a mystery.

But our spirit uses our brain, this organ, to think and God designed that brain, that organ to be moldable. Look it up. It's called neuroplasticity, or brain plasticity, in which describes the cellular changes in the brain, re-mapping, re-wiring. So the

brain is not a static organ, it's dynamic, it's mutable, not immutable. It's changeable. It's malleable. And that is a good thing. But with the wrong stimuli, it's a bad thing. We're like computers: garbage in, garbage out. On the other hand, truth in, truth out.

All these fantastic developments in technology, smartphones, high-definition television, interactive gaming, the Internet, the almost instant access, all of that gives us to seemingly infinite amount of information, all at the click of a mouse. All these blessings have hit the cultural mainland like a tidal wave, and it's radically altered the intellectual landscape, including the way we think and process information.

This high-speed medium, this high-speed conduit, this new way of accessing information, it's subtly, quietly, almost imperceptibly changing our brains. Our brains have re-wired themselves, re-mapped themselves to adapt to the new environment. The ease of access following all the hyperlinks, flitting from thing to thing, it's changed the way we assimilate information. We assimilate more on a superficial level, now.

We're very superficial thinkers even though we think that we're deep thinkers because of all the vast amount of information. So rather than readers, we've become skimmers. We scan instead of really reading. For most of us, getting the gist of the story is good enough. We don't seem to have the patience anymore for longer, more complex arguments. We're unable to follow the development of thoughts.

Look, I hope you can see, that's bad for us as Christians. That's bad for us as we seek to assimilate the truth. That's working against us. God does not reduce his truth to sound bites. He does not reduce his truth to Twitter messages of 140 characters or less.

The truth of the Gospel, though a child can apprehend it, it is infinitely complex. It is amazingly profound. It is beyond our complete comprehension. Look, even the so-called *Reader's Digest* version of the Gospel, the Gospel of Mark, that's still 678 verses. A little less if you hold to the shorter version of Mark, which ends at 16:8, but that's beside the point. That's a

lot of sentences, though, for a generation afflicted with this media-induced attention deficit disorder.

My job as your pastor, as the main teaching, preaching, elder in this church, is to get that complex, profound, ultimately incomprehensible truth into each one of you. How am I going to do that when the culture's working completely the opposite direction, and you're unaware of its implications. I need to raise this to you. Like Paul, my job in discharging my pastoral teaching responsibility, is to declare to you, Acts 27:7, "the whole counsel of God," not the *Reader's Digest* version. I'm not to, quote, "shrink back from declaring to you anything that is profitable and teaching you in public and from house to house," Acts 20:20.

Well, why is that? Look again at Ephesians 5:18. Notice the last phrase, "Be filled with the Spirit." That phrase literally reads, "Be continually being filled by the Spirit." That's what the Greek literally says, there. So just a few points of observation about that. First, the verb voice is passive. It's the passive voice, being filled. This tells us that the filling

is something that happens to us, okay? We're passive in this; it happens to us.

Second, though, even though it happens to us, because this is an imperative, because it's a command, being filled is something we have a responsibility to do. Not only that, but third, the present tense means we're responsible to be filled continually, constantly, regularly, as a habit of life. Just a fourth point of observation on that little phrase, there and here's where this involves me, my ministry to you.

Here's where this involves the entire teaching ministry of all the elders, all the Sunday school teachers, everyone in this local church. Notice that prepositional phrase translated in your Bibles as, with the Spirit. "Be being filled with the Spirit," that's how many translations render the Greek phrase, *en pneumate*, but it's not the best way to understand that.

I've come to understand this phrase through study, and it's also translated, that way, in the way I have come to understand it, in two grammatically precise translations, the Holman

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Christian Standard Bible and the New English Translation, it's best to render the phrase not as "with the Spirit," but as "by the Spirit." By the Spirit. That is to say, the Holy Spirit is not the content that fills us; he's not necessarily the wind that fills our sails. He is the agent who does the filling. He's the agent who does the filling.

So Ephesians 5:18, tells us we're responsible to be continually being filled by the Holy Spirit. With what? What, what's the content he fills us with? Again, note the parallel, Colossians 3:16, "Let the word of Christ dwell richly in you." I call that a parallel because it is. Because in Colossians 3:16, when "the word of Christ richly dwells within you," in Ephesians 5:18, when the Holy Spirit is filling you, the effects are exactly the same.

The effects are exactly the same. The Holy Spirit fills us with the content of the Word of Christ, the Word about Christ, "and in Christ are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge," right? So the Spirit fills us with the truth of the Gospel, with the apostolic truth of the New Testament, and it's your

responsibility as a Christian to be continually being filled by the Spirit with that truth.

As your pastor, I'm one part of the means to that end. The teaching ministry of the local church is the indispensable means to that end. In fact, the teaching ministry of the local church is the primary and the immediate way to apply Ephesians 5:18. You ask, does this verse mean that I'm supposed to do more personal Bible study? Well, that's one very good application that should come out of it, but it's not the immediate application. It's not the primary application.

Think about hearing this letter for the very first time. Put yourself back 2,000 years, and you're a resident of Ephesus. You're a new convert who attends First Baptist Church of Ephesus, because all those churches were Baptist churches, by the way, just saying, and you're sitting under the ministry of Pastor Timothy. Pastor Timothy pulls out his letter from the Apostle Paul, and he reads it out loud from the pulpit one Sunday morning to you.

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When you hear the command in Ephesians 5:18, you know what you're not going to do? You're not going to run home, brew a cup of tea or coffee, grab your Bible, and get into your daily devotions. Why not? Because you don't even own a personal copy of the Bible. Not many did. You just heard the letter from the pulpit. You don't have a copy of it at home. In fact, many people, because writing was expensive, it was becoming cheaper during that day, but it was still expensive, maybe they had scraps of the Bible, copies that they'd written down, went to the synagogue, copied down parts of Deuteronomy, Moses, whatever. But they didn't have a whole Bible.

What you would do to apply this text, you'd be at the church whenever they were meeting because you'd want to avail yourself of the church's teaching ministry. You'd realize what Paul said earlier in his letter, that Christ personally gave some in your church to be pastors and teachers, specifically, Ephesians 4:12, "to equip the saints." That's you, "to equip the saints for the work of the ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ."

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You'd, you'd realize the essential and foundational nature of the truth. You'd realize it's transforming power to unify God's people, to provide the full perfect knowledge of the Son of God, to bring maturity and growth in Christ-likeness. You'd recognize the need to become discerning and strong, so you're no longer children in your thinking, Ephesians 4:14, "tossed to and fro by the waves, carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness and deceitful schemes." You'd see how assimilating truth into your life is foundational to all growth and godliness.

But that takes work, right? It takes effort. Thinking is not easy. It's become increasingly difficult for those of us who've become accustomed to, getting the gist of the story, in this high-speed information age. We, we've gotten used to the ease, and the speed, and the entertaining nature of information these days, the visual ways that the culture dispenses information. We've become modern consumers of information, but we haven't learned to do the hard work of assimilating the truth, of working it in.

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Listen, beloved, there is no replacement for the method prescribed by the psalmist to open up the entire psalter, Psalms 1 verses 1 and 2. You must separate yourself from “the counsel of the wicked, from the way of sinners, and from the seat of scoffers,” and instead, you must “delight yourself in the law of the Lord.” Does his Word delight you? You must “meditate on it day and night” because if it doesn’t delight you, you’re not going to meditate on it day and night; you’re going to think about other things. All that takes work. It requires effort on our part. It requires fundamental decisions about how we’re going to spend our days, how we’re going to spend our hours, how we’re going to live our life.

But listen, beloved, the effort is so worthwhile because “Christ died to bring us to God,” 1 Peter 3:18. By studying and learning God’s precious and magnificent promises, 2 Peter 1:4, we are able “to partake of the divine nature.” By reading and studying, we learn to live out the full implications of Christ’s full and perfect atonement. We get to learn about the implications of a clear conscience, where “there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” We learn about the full implications of the Gospel about the truth that Christ

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did die to bring us to God, the blessed slavery of living in service to the Lord Jesus Christ; a lifetime of service to God and his people. That's what we get to learn.

I guarantee you, communing with the God of heaven is better than what's on TV, it's better than time with family, as good as that is. It's better than camping and backpacking in the mountains. Communion with the Triune God is what you were made for, and you have access to him right now through his Word, by his Spirit.

The author I mentioned earlier, Nicholas Carr, he also wrote a book, an excellent book, and I commend it to you. It's called *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. And that book reflects on and more fully develops the implications of neuro-plasticity, the changeable nature of the brain that I mentioned earlier. One of the benefits of the way God made our brains to change and adapt is our ability to recover something we've all but lost in the culture, something called deep reading, deep reading.

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Deep reading is active reading, it's thoughtful reading it's focused, concentrated, undistracted. Deep reading allows us as readers to get into the flow of an author's argument, his thought processes, his mind. It's possible to achieve a very close, even intimate, communion between author and reader through deep reading. This isn't mystical. Understand that at the very core of who you are, you are spirit. You're also flesh, but you're spirit. The author, also spirit. And when we verbalize, when we write, you know what that is? That's one spirit talking to another spirit. It's a communion of spirits. So when we're getting into an author's work, in one sense we're communing with that author. We're following his thinking, our thinking following his thinking, our spirit following his spirit and his thought.

Again, in his book *The Shallows*, Carr cites a published study coming out of Washington University, brain scan research conducted to find out what happens inside people's heads as they read fiction. Here's the quote, quote, "They found that readers mentally simulate each new situation encountered in a narrative. Details and actions and sensations are captured from the text and integrated with personal knowledge from past experiences.

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The brain regions that are activated often mirror those involved when people perform, imagine, or observe similar real-world activities. Deep reading, says the study's lead research, Nicole Speer, 'is by no means a passive exercise. The reader becomes the book. The bond between book reader and book writer has always been a tightly symbiotic one. The words of the writer act as a catalyst in the mind of the reader, inspiring new insights, associations, and perceptions, sometimes even epiphanies.'" End quote.

Listen, that's what God wants for us, and why he used a book, not a video but print, as the medium of communicating the truth. Remember that quote, "The reader becomes the book. The bond between book reader and book (reader) writer has always been a tightly symbiotic one." Or, in the words of the Apostle Peter, through the assimilation of God's precious and magnificent word, through that "we may become partakers of the divine nature." You get how important this is?

Deep reading leads to deep communion. So what I do as a pastor, really helpful for you. I'm here to help you understand

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the meaning of what you read in the Bible through the exposition of passages of Scripture, I'm informing your own study and reading of God's Word. I'm here to enable you to become a deep reader of the Bible, so you can read thoughtfully, so you can imbibe its truths deeply, where you can meditate it on day, on it day in day and night.

That's why you need to partake of the regular teaching ministry of your local church. A local church that's doing this, learning from its spiritually gifted teachers so you can better understand the meaning of what you read. And as you understand the meaning, you can obey its truths, you can truly commune with the author, the divine author, of this book.

Now it's not only influences, cultural influences, organic changes we're trying to overcome to get the truth into you. You've actually been taught by the prevailing evangelical culture to favor the simple over the complex. You've been taught to favor the easy over the difficult. Many of those who've been elevated into evangelical celebrity status have also been put

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forth as models of a simple, non-complex, cookies-on-the-bottom-shelf style of preaching.

Problem is when we look at those who have been upheld as models, we're not comparing apples with apples, here. I've heard these names commended to me as models of preaching in seminaries, Billy Graham, Greg Laurie, D. L. Moody, their popular, well-known crusade preaching. Listen, it's not intended, they didn't intend it, it's not intended to sustain congregations. The Harvest Crusades, the Billy Graham crusades, Moody revivals, those are evangelistic outreaches. They're not weekly pulpit ministries. Their sermons are not the week-by-week work of ministering to and shepherding and equipping a congregation of saints. They are intended to be simple.

But many evangelicals have come to believe, wrongly, I might add, they have come to believe that those few, sugar-stick sermons that they preach from city to city, they've come to believe that those, those things intended to appeal to throngs of very diverse people, many of whom, most of whom, we might say are unbelievers. They've come to believe that those should form

the pattern of preaching for, woh, weekly pulpit ministries in local churches. Not true!

Notable historian Grant Wacker has, has written an excellent biography of Billy Graham called *America's Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation*. It's a very sympathetic biography, to be sure. Whatever your own judgments about Billy Graham, positive or negative, listen, Wacker's biography is outstanding. You should get a copy of it and read it.

A point that Grant Wacker makes several times about Billy Graham's preaching is how he reduced the Christian message down, boiled it down to bare essentials, glossing over and even ignoring the depth of Christian theology in order to make his message more palatable to the masses. That's what Billy Graham wanted to do.

Here's what Wacker wrote, I quote here, "Billy Graham left out many things in order to focus on perceived essentials. His ability to understand, let alone appreciate, the historic notion

of the corporate body of Christ as a means of conversion and ethical living severely compromised his appeal to the high church traditions of the Lutherans, German Reformed, and Roman Catholics. On the other hand, that streamlining served his larger purpose of appealing to the widest possible base of broadly evangelical or evangelically minded people.

“Streamlining also prompted Graham to elide, that is, bring together alleged subtleties or fine points, like the mode of baptism or the proper understanding of speaking in tongues. Of course, the definition of what was or was not a sectarian, specific distinction versus a fundamental belief and practice, that lay in the eye of the beholder. Graham knew this, but he remained undeterred. He sought to preach a message with maximum appeal to a maximum number of people. The media he chose, crusade sermons, radio, television, popular magazine articles, and a slickly produced popular magazine, reduced the chance for theological depth in order achieve a broadly defined evangelical purpose.” End quote.

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You see what he's saying, there? He's saying Graham decidedly was simple. He was purposely simple because he thought that's the way to reach the masses. Graham's single-minded focus, he considered himself a salesman, promoting the best product to American consumers. And like a salesman, his goal was to close the deal. His aim was to get people to make a decision for Christ, to come forward, to sign a decision card and that decision gave Graham a concrete sign that he could see, that he could count for reportable statistic of success. That kept the whole thing going. That focus in Graham's ministry determined not just what he preached about, but also how he preached it. He once told correspondent David Frost, quote, "The average American has the intelligence of a twelve-year-old, religiously." End quote.

Wacker said that Graham believed that Americans, on average, quote, "possessed a working store of 600 words." End quote. "For that reason, he sought common, one or two syllable terms, arranged in paragraphs stacked high with action verbs and short, vivid sentences." End quote. Graham kept it simple, you might even say simplistic. He left the cookies on the bottom shelf. No need to confuse the customer, right? So he avoided

controversy. He stuck with universal themes. He appealed to felt needs, and he marketed his product like any other product.

Now however you judge that approach to evangelism, the important thing to note for our purposes is that Billy Graham's addresses to multitudes of unbelievers should not set the pattern for the weekly teaching ministry of the local church. Does that make sense? But that's not what happened. His preaching method came to be studied and aspired to by those who sought to draw big crowds and to appeal to large numbers of people without offending them.

The effectiveness of Graham's communication style and it was very effective. His shrewd promotion and marketing savvy and he was a very, he was a very astute observer of marketing techniques; in fact, his genius, organizational ability to handle the logistics of such large crowds, which are commendable. Those techniques have all been examined and studied and copied by mega-church pastors.

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Applying the same techniques has been the formula to draw large crowds, to navigate the logistical challenges, to communicate in non-offensive ways, and many mega-churches operate, well, many small churches as well, they operate like mini-crusades. They're staged events. They're attempting to replicate the tone and tenor of the evangelistic crusade every single week.

I attended Bible college at a prominent evangelical seminary, and our homiletics professor had us studying the methods and techniques of evangelists like Billy Graham and other prominent mega-church pastors. He actually steered us away, steered us away from deep Bible study in the pulpit, and he steered us toward these models. They were set forth as *the* models for preaching in the local church, *the* way to build and grow a church, and in his mind, talking about numbers, talking about heads to count, people in the pews, which meant dollar signs for your church budget.

I was hearing that back in the mid-nineties. It was going on before I got there, and it went on after I left, and it has

continued to be the gold standard pattern of preaching recommended in seminaries throughout the country and really because of our missionary enterprises, around the world. I've been in the Philippines, I've been in China, and I've seen that, I've seen it personally, visually watched that.

Now to be fair, not all seminaries have recommended that pattern of preaching. A few are standouts. But that leaves us with the question: What exactly should local church preaching look like? What should I be doing in the pulpit Sunday after Sunday to make sure I'm part of the means that the Holy Spirit uses to get the truth into you. I've always looked to Ezra as a model for preaching. Turn to the eighth chapter with me of Nehemiah. The little book of Nehemiah, post-exilic book, this is not exactly where you might go by instinct to find a pattern for biblical preaching. There are many places we could go, but this text gets to the heart of the matter very quickly.

Biblical preaching really starts with the preacher, and all faithful preachers, all faithful expositors follow the pattern set by Ezra, which is in Ezra 7:10. That verse Ezra 7:10, tells

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us, "Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to do it, and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel." You hear that? He studied, he obeyed, and out of that habit of life, he taught God's Word to God's people. Well, that's what I endeavor to practice in my own life, to study, to obey, and then to teach you.

How exactly, then, did Ezra teach? What was his pattern? And especially considering the fact that these are returning exiles; they're coming out of the Medo-Persian empire: Assyria taken over by Babylon, both those nations are the ones who exiled the Israelites and the people of Judah. Then Medo-pers, Medea, then Persia, Medo-Persia empire took over Babylon, they conquered, and Cyrus made a decree, send them back. Send them back.

Ezra set the foundation spiritually, built the Temple. Nehemiah built the walls of Jerusalem. They re-built Jerusalem together. So Ezra and Nehemiah kinda go together. But these returning exiles, they're not well educated. They're not bookish, academic types. So how did Ezra reach this agricultural

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community? How did he reach these tradesmen, these poor people returning from exile?

We'll take a look at Ezra, er Nehemiah, chapter 8, verse 1. I think some of you were in Ezra. Go over to Nehemiah, Nehemiah, chapter 8, verse 1, "And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel. So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard." which implicitly makes a case for Sunday school, right? I guess all the children, all who couldn't understand what they heard, were off in Children's Church so he brought all who could understand what was heard "on the first day of the," seven, "seventh month. And he read from it." Just as Rod Stillman did today. And he read from it "Facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday." kind of about the hours that we have at church service, isn't it? Early morning until midday doesn't really define the time in midday, so I'm taking liberties, there. It could be two in the afternoon, could be three, four, somewhere in there. So he read from early morning until midday "in the presence of the men and

women and those who could understand." And listen to this! "All the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law."

Folks, that's what you need to be, attentive. You need to be expository listeners to expository preaching. They "were attentive to the Book of the Law," verse 4, "And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose." Kind of like this platform, right? Wonder where we get these things, don't you? Here it is. Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for that purpose. "beside him stood" matt, matith, "Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah," Mish, "Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah," however you say that name, Banana, banana, fo-fanna, Hashbanan, I'm gonna try that again, Hashbaddanah, that's how it is said, Hashbaddanah, "Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood.

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Grace

“And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, ‘Amen, Amen,’ lifting up their hands.” They were charismatics. “And they bowed their,” faces, “heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites,” all those guys, “helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places.”

Look at verse 8, “They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly,” or some, you might translate that phrase, with translation, “and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.” Ezra, along with those other Levites and I just went through the exercise of poorly pronouncing those names, so you know I didn’t waste my seminary education, or maybe I did, but Ezra, along with the other Levites, he explained the law to the people. How? By reading from the book of the law of God, by translating, by giving the meaning. Why? So that the people could understand what was read.

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That's the biblical pattern of preaching that we practice here at this church. We read so you know the source. This isn't my word. This isn't my opinion. This is no human source. This is the authoritative Word of God, and today, because you all have copies of the Bible, you all can follow along in your Bibles to make sure of that. We translate what we read, so everyone is clear about what's actually being said. This is the crucial step of exegesis called observation, which consumes, honestly consumes, the majority of my preparation time.

I want to make sure, like a good detective, I'm seeing everything that's actually there. We have to see what's really there. We have to see what the Bible actually says before we can make judgments about what it means. So we read, we translate, or we observe, and then we interpret. We determine what the meaning is. For every text of Scripture, there is one and only one meaning. God wasn't of a double mind when he gave the Scripture. He meant one and only one thing. Nehemiah 8:8 says Ezra and the Levites were giving the meaning. Why? "So the people could understand what was read."

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Listen, why was that important? Because Ezra, the Levites, Nehemiah the governor, and all the other godly authorities among these returning exiles, they desperately wanted the people to obey God. Remember, God judged the people, and he threw them out of the land because they failed to obey his Word. Ezra and Nehemiah understood that they would only remain in the land if they obeyed. God was always very clear about that, always had been. Blessings for obedience, cursings for disobedience.

But these leaders knew people wouldn't obey what they didn't believe, and they couldn't believe what they didn't understand, so their duty as leaders was to make sure people could hear God's Word, know for sure what it was said, what, what it said, and then understand its meaning. That's all they could do as leadership, right? It was up to the individual hearer to disbelieve or to believe, to disobey or to obey.

It's the same thing for you and me, beloved. My job is to make sure you hear God's Word, and that's why we read it together. My job is to make sure you know exactly what God's Word says, and that's why I guide you through observations that

GRACE CHURCH

Grace

come from the text. My job is to make sure you understand the meaning of God's Word. That's why I don't give you a list of interpretive options and then leave it up to you to decide. I tell you, based on educated study, I tell you what I believe the text means by what it says. Most often, the observations that we make together lead you to the exact same conclusions. By making good observations, the meaning comes to us, doesn't it?

My job is not to entertain you. The world can entertain far better than religious people can. I'm not good at that. My job is not to keep all the cookies on the bottom shelf, preaching to the lowest common denominator. If I do that, then we're catering to the least mature and keeping everyone else stunted in their spiritual growth. I need to set the bar high so that we can all strive for a righteous standard. I need to dig down deep so we can all anchor ourselves, our lives, into the bedrock of God's truth. And I need to do all of that faithfully, consistently, over a long period of time because transformation, you know, comes over the long haul. Growth comes over the long haul.

GRACE CHURCH

Greeley

That's my job. It's called an expository ministry. And if we, all of us together, if we cooperate together to sustain that kind of teaching ministry, you know what? The long-term effect will be nothing less than transformative, seeing the very power of God to change families, change lives, change a people, change an entire community. By observing my pattern of teaching every week, you're going to grow in your ability to read the text more accurately for yourself, to make good observations, to ask good questions of the text, and then come to understanding for yourself.

All of that is going to help to obey the Lord more consistently. What Christian doesn't want to obey his Lord? All of that's going to help you to worship God more passionately, to serve him more steadfastly. As you grow in your ability to read and study and understand God's Word, it's going to give you food for meditation. It's going to renew your mind with divine truth. It's going to transform you from the inside out. You will have spiritual energy to take you through your life.

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Again, it's that deep reading. It's that ability to engage the text and the author of the text and his mind and his thinking with focus sustained thinking. And that's going to bring you into intimate communion with the author. When that happens, watch out, because what Jesus promised is going to happen to you, too. John 7:38, "Whoever believes in me as the scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." I want that, don't you?

Well, that's the first point we need to cover for this morning. That's how we assimilate the truth. We're to consider our second question next week: how we reinforce that truth that we hear and understand, how we reinforce it with each other. But just before we close, I told you it would be a little longer, here, just bear with me, I want to give you a little list of things to do to grow in your ability to assimilate the truth. A list of four things, four simple things. And they have to do with before, during, and after I preach.

Before I preach, number one: before I preach review where we've been and where we're going. It's an expository ministry,

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Grace

so there's no real surprise about where we're going in the text. If I covered one section in Luke in one week, the next, next week you come in, I'm going to be covering the next section. So review where we've been and where we're going. Read it. Pray that God will open your heart to his Word as you read. That's one of the benefits of an expository ministry, you know what's coming. I'm not up here giving my sugar-stick sermons. I'm not up here with a bully pulpit just to tell you what's on my mind. You're here to hear from the living God, and we're going to go consecutively through the text, exactly as the Spirit wanted you to hear it. So before I preach, review where we've been, where we're going, and pray that God will open your heart.

When I preach, number two: When I preach, take notes. Take notes. You don't have to get everything, every cross reference, every word. This isn't, dict, dictation. Just make sure you understand the main points enough to summarize them in your notes. That means you have to listen carefully, thoughtfully. You have to follow the argument. You have to be able to distill that down into some things that make sense in your notes, so that when you go back to it later, you'll be able to unpack that and remember what I taught.

So that leads us to number three, after I preach. Review your notes. Pray and ask God how to apply these principles to your life. Contrary to popular opinion, it's not my job to give you ten points of application that every single one of you can grab on to and do something with. It's not, *Twelve Steps to a Happy Marriage*, or *Twelve Steps to Independence Financially*, or it's not that. My job is to make sure you understand what the text says, what it means by what it says, and to convey the appropriate sense of that text. If exhortation, then I exhort. If explanation, I explain. What I should also do is give you the implication of any text for your lives, which I try to do. Listen for that. Listen for not only what it means by what it says, but also the so what? So what, okay, now that I understand that, so what? Great!

So ask those kind of questions so you take this further in your own personal life. Ask questions that lead you to application. For example, what are the main points of the passage? What principles can I glean from these points? Why did God want me to hear that message, those points, this morning? Is there a sin I need to confess? Is there a relationship I need to

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Grace

restore or reconcile? Is there a word that need to hear to encourage me? How does my thinking need to change so I grow in consistency in living out these principles in my life? Listen, ask those questions, a number of questions like that to help you apply the messages for yourself. I'm going to post some more questions like that on the web site.

So that's before, during, after I preach. One more suggestion, number four: Expose yourself to good teaching. Expose yourself to good teaching. Start by reading your Bible regularly. It's amazing how few professing Christians read their Bibles every day. Trust me, you'll be better able to assimilate the truth if you're exposing yourself to truth every single day. And you will be more attuned to the preaching if, if your Bible reading is a consistent, regular, inviolable habit in your life.

You need to be like the psalmist who wrote Psalm 119, "I promise to keep your words; how sweet are your words to my taste. Your word imparts understanding to the simple. The unfolding of your words gives light. I rise before dawn and I cry for help. I hope in your words. My heart stands in awe of

GRACE CHURCH

Greeley

your words." Man, if that's your heart, your gonna, it's gonna drive you right to the Bible.

That's the beauty of how God made our brains: Malleable, mutable, able to change and adapt, able to break all those old, neuro pathways and to re-wire, re-map, build new pathways. You can train your brain to read God's Word deeply, thoughtfully, prayerfully, meditatively.

While you're working on developing a habit of consistent daily Bible reading, try listening to good preaching as well. Try listening to good preaching. All preachers are not alike, but all good preachers, all faithful preachers, do what I'm doing. So read good books. Read good sermons, good articles that will deepen you understanding of biblical doctrine.

Go deeper. Engage in a little personal Bible study for yourself. Get yourself a *MacArthur Study Bible* or a really good study Bible, the *ESV Study Bible* is a good one, too, and just read a passage, read the accompanying footnote, and then write down your observations and reactions. If you like to go deeper

GRACE CHURCH

Greeley

still, get a commentary or two. Do the same thing. Again, I'm going to give you some helpful resources, ways you can go deeper, I'll post articles on the web site to help you grow in your own assimilation of the truth. Everything is just gonna be just peachy once we get that web site launched. Okay? You all will finally be able to grow.

Alright, well, that's enough for now. So many challenges to overcome in striving to assimilate the truth, but God is faithful. He cares more about our success in this regard than even we do, than even I do. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to help us. Nothing can, sucede, succeed in standing against us, right? Let's bow together in prayer.

Heavenly Father, I just thank you this morning for well for first of all for allowing my voice to hold out, but I pray also, Lord, that you'd help us all to assimilate the truth as one body together. We love you. We give thanks to you for all of this. In Jesus' name, amen.