

Introduction

I'd like to begin this morning by asking you a question. What is the most influential book you've ever read? I'd answer that question by saying this. Dallas Willard's book *The Divine Conspiracy* has impacted my person and life more profoundly than any other book – except one. That one is the Bible. The Bible is beyond any shadow of a doubt the single most influential book in the world. It alters our persons and lives more dramatically and in more ways than any other book ever written. Psalm 119:97-104 reveals two of those ways, both of which I want to discuss with you today.

Informs Our Minds

First, it informs our minds. We see that in verses 98-100 and three bold claims they make. The Bible makes us wiser than our enemies, more insightful than our teachers, and more knowledgeable than the aged. That refers of course to enemies, teachers, and the aged who don't know the Bible.

Think about some of the icons of our popular culture who are considered the most insightful – Oprah, Dr. Phil, Tony Robbins, Suze Orman, and more. As far as I know, they don't have a grasp of the Bible. If you do, the psalmist says, then you are more insightful than they are. You know more about the universe and life in it than Oprah, Dr. Phil, and the rest do. That's no exaggeration. You know more than they do.

That's because the Bible informs our minds. It tells us the most important things that we need to know about the most important issues in human life. Think about the issues in human life that matter the most to people. How can I influence others for good? How should I react when people criticize me? How should I approach dying? How can I stay motivated at work? How can I have a fulfilling marriage? How should I raise my children? How can I live happily within my means? How do I handle not being good looking? And so on. The Bible gives us the best

information about those concerns that is possible.

Suze Orman, for instance, is probably our culture's most popular icon when it comes money. She gives a lot of advice about increasing our means so that we can live happily within it. But she apparently doesn't know the most important truths that were ever spoken on the subject – by Jesus in Matthew 6:19-33. I kid you not. What Jesus says there about money is worth more than everything that Suze Orman has ever said about it put together. Do what He says there in fact and you will always live happily within your means.

It's true. The Bible informs our mind. It's often said that experience is the best teacher. But I disagree and more importantly so does the psalmist. Experience isn't the best teacher. The Bible is. It tells us the most important things that we need to know about the most important issues in life. If we know it therefore, it makes us wiser than our enemies, more insightful than our teachers, and more knowledgeable than the aged.

I'd sum up those three claims in 98-100 this way. My wife and I enjoy going to Amish country in southern Ohio. The Amish there have a slogan that some of you know, **"Too soon old, too late smart."** Thankfully, it doesn't have to be that way. Study and learn what the Bible teaches. You'll be "soon smart" if you do.

Changes Our Taste

The Bible dramatically impacts our persons and lives in a second way. It changes our taste.

Look at verses 103-104. In verse 103, the psalmist reveals what is sweet to his moral taste as honey, or in modern terms Reese Cups, are to his physical taste. It's God's "words," which are right and true. Then in verse 104, he reveals what he hates, that is, what is as offensive to his moral taste as cod liver oil is to his physical taste. It's "every false way", meaning what is wrong and false. In verses 103-104, in other words, He reveals what attracts and repulses him. Let's stop for a

moment and think about just that - what attracts and repulses people.

Take the reality shows that are so popular on television now. Watch their promos and you'll see what one of their defining elements is - discord. They purposely promote and record interpersonal conflict between the participants in them. That's quite revealing. It unveils what attracts a majority of Americans today - discord and conflict. They're drawn to relational tension. They find bickering, backbiting, and even fighting entertaining. They actually get pleasure from it.

But what attracts some people, repulses others, including me. Those reality shows are revolting to me. I think they're abhorrent. What draws me isn't discord but concord. I find harmony and peace entertaining. I get pleasure from that. Call me a "stick in the mud" or "an old prude" but I'll take *The Brady Bunch* any day and am not ashamed to admit it.

That illustrates in general the two poles of attraction and repulsion. On the one hand, some people are attracted to the right and true and repulsed by the wrong and false. On the other hand, some are attracted to the wrong and false and repulsed by the right and true. So which is it for us? Practice the spiritual discipline of examen and the Holy Spirit will show us. He'll show us the things we're attracted to and repulsed by.

Now, notice what the psalmist teaches us about that. In verse 102, he writes, "**For you yourself have taught me.**" In verse 104, he writes, "**From Your precepts I get understanding.**" Those two statements teach us something. God Himself teaches and interacts with us through His written word the Bible and changes our taste. Attraction to the right and true and repulsion at the wrong and false are acquired tastes in other words. And what makes us acquire them is the Bible.

I've experienced that and so have many of you. God Himself taught us and interacted with us through His written word and it changed our taste. Things that at one time appealed to us now don't. And things that at one time didn't appeal to us now do.

Several years ago, for instance, a Christian shared with me how studying the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 had changed her. She

mentioned several things one of which was this. Before studying it, she enjoyed gossiping and listening to gossip. She got pleasure from it. But now, she said, it "turns her off" and she gets no pleasure from it. So, as the psalmist did in verse 101-102, she restrains her feet from evil. She doesn't gossip or listen to gossip.

What an exciting testimony that is. It illustrates what verses 101-104 teach. God's written word, the Bible, not only informs our minds. It changes our taste as well.

Read the Bible Well

But it does so only if we engage it. The Bible is inherently powerful. But if all it does is sit on a shelf and collect dust, it'll do nothing in or for us. It doesn't take a genius to figure it out. We have to engage it and this passage tells us how. It's by doing two things.

First, we have to read it well. Look at the word "understanding" in verse 104. Good sense tells us the Bible won't influence us unless we understand it. To understand it, we have to do four things, three of which I preached about last week. The fourth is this. We have to read it well. Reading it well is implicit in understanding it.

To read it well means to concentrate on and analyze it. Doing that isn't a complicated thing. Instead of just rushing through the verses like many Christians do, we actually stop, ask, and try to answer the right questions about them.

Let me give you a sampling of what I mean, Proverbs 26:4-5. Verse 4, "**Do not answer a fool according to his folly.**" Verse 5, "**Answer a fool as his folly deserves.**" Who is the fool? It's a person who lacks understanding? What does his folly refer to? It refers to he saying things that we know not to be true. How should we respond when he does? Verse 4 advises that we should say nothing in return. But verse 5 advises that we should say something constructive in return. But isn't that contradictory? No, it isn't. Proverbs aren't complete statements of truth. They're by nature brief. Thus, they don't state everything about a

truth but point to it instead. There are times when it's unprofitable to answer a fool and so we shouldn't, verse 4. There are also times when it's profitable to answer a fool and so we should, verse 5. We decide that on a case-by-case basis as good sense and the Holy Spirit dictate we should. That's the message of these two verses.

You can see then that we have to understand the Bible in order for it to inform our minds and change our taste. And to understand it, we have to read it well. We have to take the time to ask and answer the right questions about the text we're reading.

Meditate on the Bible All the Day

There's a second thing we have to do. According to verse 97, meditate on it all the day. To meditate on it means to think intently about it, to bring it before our minds and keep it there. We should do that "all the day." That means as consistently as our everyday responsibilities and routines allow us to.

Now, doing that requires some degree of memorizing verses and passages. "Some degree" suggests that we don't have to remember them word for word. But we do have to remember in some detail what they say. Reading well and understanding help us do just that. They implant the verses or passages in our minds so that we're able to recall them in their essential if not their exact details.

So that's what we do. We bring the essential details of the verses and passages we've read to mind. We do that purposely. We also do it as consistently as we can as we move through our days. We place our minds on verses and passages and keep them there as much as we can.

Take a wonderful little Psalm, 131, as an example of what I mean. This psalm anticipates the object lesson of Matthew 18:1-4 and is about presumption and pride. I read the three verses of this Psalm well, using a commentary to assist me, and took the time to understand its essential details. One of those is a weaned child who rests on its mother's breast. At one time, feeding at the breast was indispensable to the child. So, it

fretted to do so. But now that it's weaned, it can actually rest on its mother's breast without fretting to feed. In the same way, at one time getting what I wanted was indispensable to me. So, I fretted constantly about it. But Jesus and His resurrection power have weaned me from that. So I can actually move through life without fretting to get what I want. I can actually have freedom from the nagging of self-seeking.

I haven't memorized Psalm 131's exact details but I have memorized its essential details. I don't know it word for word but I do know its teaching through and through. And because I do, I am able to bring it to mind as everyday situations dictate that I should. So, when I don't get my way and feel stirrings of resentment in me, I place my mind on it. I focus on being free from the nagging of self-seeking just as a weaned baby is free from the nagging of feeding at its mother's breast.

Meditating on the Bible "all the day" may be the most transforming of all spiritual activities. Listen to what Dallas Willard writes about that: **"The practice of memorizing the scriptures is more important than a daily quiet time, for as we fill our minds these great passages and have them available for our meditation, quiet time takes over the entirety of our lives."** He's right. So, let's do just that. Understand verses and passages and fill our minds with them every day.

Conclusion

I close with a thought. Several years ago, a national magazine published a story that concluded, **"prison radicalized the life of Chuck Colson."** Colson then wrote a response to that article that said this: **"What 'radicalized' me was not prison but taking to heart the truths revealed in Scripture . . . It is the Bible that continues to challenge my life today. It is the power of God's word, and it is, by itself, life changing."** He's right. Understand the Bible by reading it well and meditate on what you understand all the day. That will do for you what it did for Colson. It will radicalize your life. There's no doubt about it. The Bible is the most influential book in the world.