

5 Ways You Should Not Approach Reading the Bible

I've been reading the Bible almost every day for decades. I firmly believe that *any* listening and reading of Scripture is better than none at all, but I do think that some of the ways I've read the Bible have ended up restricting my own spiritual growth.

How can that be? Across those decades, I've also learned some of the ways *not* to approach the Bible. Hopefully, what I share with you here can help you avoid some of the same pitfalls.

This list isn't exhaustive, but perhaps it can serve as a catalyst for you to explore the way you think about your own Bible reading. If you find you've fallen into one of the same traps I have, just tell God that you're sorry, ask Him to help you to make the necessary adjustments and then keep reading!

1. **Feeling guilty:** I always felt like "good Christians" read the Bible, so I probably should too. I wanted God to like me, so I would read the Bible out of trying to please God, out of a kind of guilt. I tended to see God as either punitive ("If I don't read, God will be mad at me") or almost like He was a "lucky charm" ("If I read, God will reward me"). Neither of these approaches really helped me grow closer to God and grow spiritually.

At its core, engaging Scripture is a relational process. We come to a loving God through the Scriptures because we want to know Him, to understand what is true and to be changed into the person He created us to be. Approaching anybody out of a sense of trying to win them over or because of guilt really limits the depth that relationship can reach. The same is true of approaching God. If we're trying to win Him over through reading the Bible or if we read simply because we feel guilty, we won't be drawing closer to God.

Guilt in my life is a poor motivator—the results don't last or give me life. Of course, real guilt is important because guilt forces us to see that we're sinners who need God's forgiveness. However, if you approach the Bible only out of a sense of guilt, you will not be prepared to fully engage the God who loves you so much that He sent His Son to die for you. Love of God is the motivator that keeps me coming to the Bible each day. I love Him and want to spend time with Him. Reading the Bible has become a "must" and not just an "ought." It helps me to remember that I'm not doing God a favor by spending time in the Bible; instead, He has done me a favor by giving the Bible as the gracious means of knowing Him.

2. **Looking to find just a devotional thought:** I've also spent a fair amount of time approaching the Bible for a "devotional thought" for the day. I'd come to Scripture for a quick, happy thought that would be an encouragement for my day—maybe something tied to a nice moral story to make me a better person—but hopefully nothing too intrusive on my comfortable life.

But the Bible never presents itself as warm and fuzzy. Hebrews 4:12 tells us, "For the word of God is alive, and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intents of the heart." Treating God's Word like a warm and cuddly toy when it is really a double-edged sword (or a fire and a hammer, as in Jeremiah 23:29) is condescending, perhaps even dangerous.

So now I try to come to the Bible ready to be challenged, to be asked to change and to be brought to my knees. Perhaps what God is often doing for us in the Bible is coaching us, calling us to His kingdom work. He is the type of coach we can love and trust, who knows us better than we know ourselves. He believes in us, pushing us wisely, developing us into the kind of person we only hoped we could be. For sure, I still often find a wonderful thought to brighten my day when I read

Scripture, but I'm looking for much more than that—I'm looking to be deeply changed from within.

- 3. Reading only for content or information:** I naturally like information; I'm always trying to learn something new. The Bible is a rich place for gathering information; it is full of all kinds of content. It's a window into a number of ancient worlds, as well as a window into the spiritual world. I've spent a lot of time reading the Bible to just gather information.

While all of the information in the Bible is fascinating, I've discovered that knowing facts from the Bible is not the same as having a relationship with God Himself. The person who knows the most Bible facts is not necessarily the person who knows God the most. If we elevate facts above meeting God, then we've lost the most important facet of the Bible. If we read primarily to learn content, it can lead to treating the Bible like an object for us to control or as a problem to be solved.

I do believe knowing the content of the Bible is critically important because it is through those real-life realities that God makes Himself known. But I try to no longer come to the Bible like I'm trying to pass a Bible trivia exam; I try to come to the Bible ready to meet my Creator. I now try to read the Bible out of a desire for a relationship and out of love for God—not just to learn facts.

- 4. Focusing only on self:** Have you ever overheard a conversation that you thought was about you but really turned out to be about someone else? I have, and it always is embarrassing and has even led to some deep misunderstandings. At times, I've read the Bible thinking that it is a story primarily about me. When I do that, I'm reading to understand myself and not God. Not every word in the Bible is a direct instruction of how I should live. In reality, the Bible is *God's story*.

Yes, we learn a great deal about ourselves in the Bible, but to think that every word is all about me leads me to misunderstanding the message of Scripture.

The Bible is a sweeping story about God. It is only as we grow in our understanding of God, His character and His plan that we will really start to understand our place in His story. Perhaps the best question we can ask after reading a passage of Scripture is, "What does this tell me about God/Jesus?"

5. Thinking it's only about rules: I have a friend who told me he didn't like to read the Bible because it felt like a book of rules. I've felt the same way at times, as if God wanted to control all of my actions by giving me a lot of directions about what not to do. When I start to think this way, I tend to avoid the Bible altogether—who would read a book of rules on their own?

The truth is that the Bible is about God and His loving actions of redeeming us and making us into His people. To view the Bible as a bunch of rules is similar to viewing marriage vows as a list of rules. My marriage vows were about the love and promises my wife and I made to enhance and protect our relationship. I wanted to make them! The Bible is about love also. To view it as a set of rules is to miss the whole point and to ruin the loving relationship it is designed to protect.

So now I try to come to the Bible understanding that God did, indeed, give His people rules, but they're not rules that I have to follow in order to *earn* a relationship with Him; instead, they're rules to *enhance* my relationship with Him.

Conclusion

So, my encouragement to you today is to come to the Bible often—not out of guilt, not to get a verse to make you happy, not merely to learn facts, not just to focus on yourself and not out of fear. Come to the Bible to build a relationship with the God who loves you, asking Him to meet you in His

Word. When you do this, you'll experience what we read about in Psalm 1:2—you'll experience "delight" in God's Word. There is nothing more motivating to continue in my Bible reading than when I find that I am delighting in God through His Word!

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