

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of theology today by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. We are currently discussing the doctrine of sanctification and last week we discussed God's primary means of communicating to believers, which is through his written Word. We weren't able to finish the topic, so how would you like to proceed today Dr. Spencer?

Dr. Spencer: Well, I think it would be good to begin with a very brief review of the main points we made. First, we pointed out that the Word of God is essential for spiritual life, just as food is essential for physical life.

Marc Roby: And, in that context, I remember that you quoted Matthew 4:4 where we read that Jesus said, "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." ¹

Dr. Spencer: Yes. That's an important verse. I might also point out that Robert Reymond, in his systematic theology, calls *all* of the means of grace "spiritual 'food'" for the Christian², which I think is accurate, but the Word is primary. And that leads to the second point we made, which was that the written Word of God, in other words, the Bible, is the most important means of communication God has with us because it is the only *objective* means of communication we have. Third, we noted that to understand the Bible when you read it, you must study theology, history, geography and so on. You need to understand the context and have a way of organizing your understanding, and systematic theology provides that.

Marc Roby: That point brings out one of the advantages of hearing the Word preached in addition to our private reading. A good pastor will provide the information necessary to put the passage in context and show how it applies to our lives today.

Dr. Spencer: That is a good point. And I hope to come back to that at some later time because Reformed theologians in general have held that the preaching of the Word is even more important than reading the Word – although they *never* mean to imply that we should neglect our personal Bible study and *only* listen to preachers.

Marc Roby: The importance of the preached word is made clear in the Westminster Shorter Catechism as well. Question 89 asks, "How is the word made effectual to salvation?", and the answer given is that "The Spirit of God makes the reading, *but especially the preaching* of the Word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation." [emphasis added]

Dr. Spencer: That's a great point. But, getting back to our quick review, the fourth point we made was that we must study God's Word prayerfully and seriously. The Bible is the *most*

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² Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2nd Ed., Zondervan Academic, 1998, pg. 911

important book you will ever read. You must take it seriously. Fifth, we pointed out that the Word equips God's children for the work he wants us to do. It is not written to entertain us, although it can be very entertaining, it is written to save us and to provide us with the instruction and encouragement we need to live the Christian life.

Marc Roby: And I quoted 2 Timothy 3:16-17 as the classic verses in this regard. In that passage the apostle Paul wrote that "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's an important passage. I then said that I had three more points to make, but we ran out of time after only covering two of them. The first of those, which was our sixth major point, was that we must be born again. Even though it may seem completely obvious, this cannot go unsaid.

Marc Roby: And you quoted 1 Corinthians 2:14, which tells us that "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned."

Dr. Spencer: Which is another very important verse, and well worth repeating. The seventh, and last, point we made last week was that we must read the Bible obediently. The Word does us no good if we read it, but don't do what it says. In fact, that makes us *more* culpable for our sins. And, to repeat just one more important verse from last week, you then quoted James 1:22, where the Lord's brother warns us, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."

Marc Roby: Alright, that leaves us then with the final point you wanted to make, the eighth point. What is that?

Dr. Spencer: Well, it is so obvious that you might think it could go without being said, but it can't. The final point is that we must study the Bible consistently, by which I mean, daily. I'm not saying that you can't possibly miss a day once in a blue moon, but it should be an extremely rare occurrence for a real Christian. Your relationship with God is the *most* important relationship you have. Even more important than your relationship with your spouse, or your parents, or your children, or anyone else.

Marc Roby: I'm quite sure that there are professing Christians out there who would argue that you are being a bit extreme by saying we should read the Word of God every single day.

Dr. Spencer: I'm sure you're right about that. But I would ask anyone who thinks that way a simple question. What would you think of a marriage where the husband and wife don't speak to each other for days at a time?

Marc Roby: I would say that that marriage is headed for big-time trouble.

Dr. Spencer: I think that's obviously true. And a person's relationship with God is also headed for big-time trouble if he or she goes for days without hearing what God has to say *through his written Word*. We can't take a vacation from the Word of God without putting ourselves at

serious risk. Don't depend on your subjective feelings. They can be wrong. You can be deceived. You need to read the Word daily. It needs to be a continual part of your life. You need to memorize it. In Psalm 119:11 the psalmist declares, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." You need to meditate on God's Word. In fact, a person's attitude toward the Word of God is one way to define the difference between a believer and an unbeliever.

Marc Roby: I'm going to guess that you have Psalm 1 in mind when you say that.

Dr. Spencer: I do, yes. It is an important psalm, and it isn't very long, so let me read the whole thing. It says, "Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers. Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish." (Psalm 1:1-6)

Marc Roby: Yes, that is an important psalm. And it draws a sharp distinction between the wicked and the righteous, a distinction grounded in large part on whether you meditate on the Word of God day and night.

Dr. Spencer: And we must ask what it is that the wicked person meditates on. There are many possible answers of course, far too many to list them, but the fact that none of them are the Word of God tells us that they are *all* the thoughts of men. So the distinction is obvious. It goes back to the original temptation in the Garden. Are you going to believe God, or a creature? If you believe that God is the source of all truth, then you will *want* to meditate on what God says, not on what man, or any other creature says.

But before anyone runs too far with that comment, let me add that men and women have said many very wonderful and useful things. Things worthy of meditation. But only those that are in agreement with the Word of God are wonderful and useful. God is the source of all that is good. And God's Word must be primary in the life of a Christian. It is our ultimate standard for truth.

Marc Roby: And we could add that if we have been born again, we love God, so reading his Word is a delight, not a burden.

Dr. Spencer: That's again a very good point. It doesn't negate the fact that God's Word can be difficult to understand and apply at times, or that it requires hard work, but it is, nonetheless, true. James Boice gives us a wonderful quote in his book the *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, which we have been using frequently. He wrote, "Dwight L. Moddy once said, 'In prayer we talk to God, in Bible study God talks to us, and we had better let God do most of the talking.'"³

³ James Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Revised in One Volume, InterVarsity Press, 1986, pg. 492

Marc Roby: I like that quote a lot! It reminds me of what a mutual friend of ours likes to say. He says his father used to tell him that he should never miss an opportunity to be quiet and listen.

Dr. Spencer: It is obviously true that we learn more by listening than by speaking. But, of course, we have to be careful to whom we listen. There is no better source to listen to than the Word of God.

Marc Roby: Very well. Are we done discussing Bible study then as a means of grace?

Dr. Spencer: We are for now, yes. So, I'd like to move on to the other side of the coin so to speak. As I noted last time, any good relationship involves two-way communication. God speaks to us primarily through his Word, and we speak to God primarily through prayer.

Marc Roby: Now, I want to stop you right here and bring up a very common question regarding prayer. Given the fact that God knows my every thought, why do I need to pray at all? I certainly can't communicate something to him that he doesn't already know. Jesus himself told us, as we read in Matthew 6:8, that our "Father knows what [we] need before [we] ask him."

Dr. Spencer: Well, that's quite true. We also famously read in Psalm 139:1-4, "O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord."

So the basic premise of that objection to prayer is true; you can't possibly tell God anything he doesn't already know. In fact, he knew it before the universe existed! The shortest answer I can give to the question of why we need to pray is that God commands us to pray.

Marc Roby: And that should be reason enough for a true Christian. It is a command. In one of the shortest verses in all of Scripture, we are commanded in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 to "pray continually".

Dr. Spencer: And in addition, in Ephesians 6:18, the apostle Paul wrote, "pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints." And the prophet Samuel, when asked by the people to pray for them, said, in 1 Samuel 12:23, "far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by failing to pray for you." We can deduce from that verse that it is a sin for a spiritual leader to not pray for the people over which God has made him an overseer.

Marc Roby: And, we could add, that Jesus even commanded us to pray for our enemies. We read in Matthew 5:44 that Jesus said, "I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you".

Dr. Spencer: That's again very true. And in one of the most comforting verses in the Bible, God also gave us a promise regarding prayer. In 2 Chronicles 7:14 God tells us, "if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."

Marc Roby: That is a marvelous promise. And our land certainly needs healing. But, aside from the fact that God has commanded us to pray and has promised to hear our prayers, which certainly is sufficient cause for a Christian to pray, I think many still wonder *why* God wants us to pray. He clearly knows what we need and what we want.

Dr. Spencer: And there are two main answers to that question. The first is given by John Calvin in his monumental work, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He wrote that those who argue that it is superfluous to pray because God already knows whatever we are going to say, “attend not to the end for which the Lord taught us to pray. It was not so much for his sake as for ours.”⁴ Calvin is certainly correct here. We derive great benefit from prayer. We’ll talk about that more later, but let me give the second reason first. We should pray because it is one of the secondary means God has appointed to carry out his decrees.

Marc Roby: By calling it a secondary means, you are saying it is not the primary cause of the event, but it *is*, nonetheless, a real cause.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. Suppose a man needs a fence built, but he doesn’t have the time to do it himself and he knows someone else who needs work. So he hires this other man to build the fence. He provides him with the tools, materials and plan for the fence and pays him to build it. Now, let me ask, who is responsible for the fence being built?

Marc Roby: Well, obviously, they both are.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. And although the first person *could* have done it by himself, and was clearly the primary actor, the other person was truly involved. This a poor analogy, but the best I can come up with. God has ordained to use our prayers as a means of accomplishing his work. Which has benefit for us – which goes back to Calvin’s point – that we are privileged to participate in the work and our faith is built up as we see answered prayer.

The theologian Charles Hodge expressed the use of prayer as a means well, and specifically with regard to this objection that there is no need to pray given that God has foreordained everything that comes to pass. He wrote, “it is certain that the Scriptures teach both foreordination and the efficacy of prayer. The two, therefore, cannot be inconsistent. God has not determined to accomplish his purposes without the use of means; and among those means, the prayers of his people have their appropriate place. If the objection to prayer, founded on the foreordination of events, be valid, it is valid against the use of means in any case. If it be unreasonable to say, ‘If it be foreordained that I should live, it is not necessary for me to eat,’ it is no less unreasonable for me to say, ‘If it be foreordained that I should receive any good, it is not necessary for me to ask for it.’ If God has foreordained to bless us, He has foreordained that we should seek his blessing. Prayer has the same causal relation to the good bestowed, as any other means has to the end with which it is connected.”⁵

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Translated by Henry Beveridge, Hendrickson Publishers, 2008, Book III, Chapter 20, Paragraph 3, pg. 564

⁵ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, 1997, vol. III, pg. 699

Marc Roby: That's a meaty statement. People will probably have to think about it for a while. So, given that we are just about out of time, do you have anything else to say before we end for today?

Dr. Spencer: Yes. I'd like to read one more quote, this time from J.I. Packer. And this quote does a great job of tying together our study of the Bible and our prayer. It illustrates the two-way nature of this unique form of communication; where we speak to God in prayer and he speaks to us primarily through his written Word. Packer wrote, "Does God, then, really tell us things when we pray? Yes. We shall probably not hear voices, nor feel sudden strong impressions of a message coming through (and we shall be wise to suspect such experiences should they come our way); but as we analyze and verbalize our problems before God's throne, and tell him what we want and why we want it, and think our way through passages and principles of God's written Word bearing on the matter in hand, we shall find many certainties crystallizing in our hearts as to God's view of us and our prayers, and his will for us and others. If you ask, 'Why is this or that happening?' no light may come, for 'the secret things belong to the Lord our God' (Deuteronomy 29:29); but if you ask, 'How am I to serve and glorify God here and now, where I am?' there will always be an answer."⁶

Marc Roby: Yes, that's a great good. I especially like the facts that he points out, as we have, that we need to be very suspicious of our subjective experiences and also that we must ask the right questions when we seek God in prayer. And I look forward to discussing prayer more in our next session. For now, let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We'd love to hear from you.

⁶ J.I. Packer, *Growing in Christ*, Crossway Books, 1994, pg. 156