

The Spiritual Habits of Jesus Series

Jesus' Habit of Meditation (Mt. 22:37)

By
Andy Davis

At A Glance:

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These sermon study notes are designed to be a tool used after listening to the sermon. This resource is a guide to help deepen understanding regarding the Scriptures and ideas presented in the sermon. Those who use these study notes are encouraged to look up, read through, and think about Scripture references in this guide. There is more information in these notes than what is presented in the sermon. These study notes are designed to be used as an independent study tool to help the formation of Biblical convictions, character, and conduct.

Jesus' Habit of Meditation

- I. Introduction
 - A. Video: The Bible as Jewish Meditation Literature by Bible Project¹
 - B. The Bible is designed to be a group of writings that leads a person toward meditation—continual and repeated thinking about what is written. Meditating on the Bible is a lifelong journey of ever deepening discovery. This is both exciting and challenging. Meditation requires work, but the results are incredible.
 - C. Jesus spent time in mediation, which becomes visible as He communicates His message. Jesus constantly made connections between common, everyday experiences and God. In an astonishing way, Jesus presented His teachings, in many cases, in a way that was connected to the immediate situation or context of those who were listening. Jesus even used physical objects around Him to explain spiritual facts. Jesus told His professional fisherman disciples that they would be “fishers of men” (Mt. 4:19) when explaining what Jesus would train them to do.
 - D. Meditation was an important feature in the life and ministry of Jesus, which allowed Him to be more effective in His work for the Father. Disciples can learn from Jesus to increase their impact on others as well.
- II. Command to Meditate
 - A. When Jesus was asked what the most important commandment God has given to humanity around which people are to structure their lives, He said:

³⁷ And He said to him, “YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.”³⁸ This is the great and foremost commandment.” (Mt. 22:37-38)²
 - B. Jesus views loving God with our mind as a commandment—a moral requirement from God that every individual has a moral obligation to submit to. In other words, Jesus both requires and expects those who are following Him to direct their mental abilities in specific ways. Our minds should be primarily focused on God.³ Here we see the command to meditate—to direct our mental energy and ability toward God.
 - C. A clear example of Jesus’ high expectation when it comes to the use of our mind is found when Jesus is confronting Peter when Peter attempted to prevent Jesus from going to the cross. Jesus made a very important statement related to this command when He told Peter, “You are not setting your mind on God’s interests” (Mt. 16:23).⁴ Jesus expected Peter to have his mind focused on the interests of God and to keep His attention fixed there. Jesus asserts that Peter should have been thinking one way, but he is thinking another way. In other words, God’s interests are to be Peter’s permanent mental posture. However, since Peter wasn’t doing this,

¹ This video is available on the church app on the Training Tab in the Bible Project section. Under the *How to Read the Bible* heading the video’s title is “The Bible as Jewish Meditation Literature”. Follow these steps: 1) Open the app 2) Training tab 3) Bible Project 4) How to Read the Bible 5) The Bible as Jewish Meditation Literature

² See also Mark 12:30, Colossians 3:2, Romans 8:5, Philippians 3:19

³ For more on this command see Andy Davis’ sermon series *The Great Commandment* sermon six titled “Loving God with All our Mind” available on the church app.

⁴ Mk. 8:33

Peter failed to connect the dots that Jesus’ death was a necessary part of God’s plan. Instead, Peter wanted to keep following Jesus, protect Him, and not let bad things happen to Him—which is a natural human response.

- D. The problem is that the natural human response doesn’t set the mind on God’s interests. Disciples need to learn to discipline themselves to think differently. While changing how we think is painful and difficult, it is also necessary at the same time. Disciples must regularly practice the habit of meditation by “setting their minds on the things above” (Col. 3:2) instead of that which only pertains to this world and this life.
- E. Jesus sets two broad categories before us in His conversation with the religious leader Nicodemus. Nicodemus, like Peter and everyone else, had a hard time understanding Jesus because His mind was so cluttered because it only focused on earthly topics. Since Nicodemus’ mind was only filled with what is right in front of him, He was unable to understand Jesus, even when Jesus was using events related to this world to explain the kingdom of heaven. Jesus is teaching Nicodemus about His need to be made spiritually alive and start His life over with Jesus. Jesus did this by using physical birth as an explanation of what He meant. Nicodemus completely misunderstands Jesus because He can only think in earthly terms. Nicodemus thinks Jesus is telling him, as a grown man, that he needs to re-enter the womb a second time. In actuality, Jesus is talking about a work of the Holy Spirit theologians call regeneration in which God puts His life inside a person to make them responsive to Him.
- F. In this conversation, two categories of topics related to our mental focus are presented by Jesus to Nicodemus:

¹² If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? (Jn. 3:12)

- G. Broadly speaking, there are two general categories of topics our thoughts can be directed toward: earthly or heavenly (2 Cor. 4:18).⁵ The category of earthly topics involves anything that relates to the present life and the current world. Earthly topics center on the physical and the here and now—that which is happening right in front of us. Heavenly topics relate to God, His activity in the world, the immaterial (and eternity)—that which remains after this life is over. While these two “realms”, as Jesus calls them elsewhere (Jn. 18:36), are interrelated and connected, they are distinct. The fundamental human problem, as demonstrated in Peter and Nicodemus, is that human nature in its default condition only operates in the earthly realm; it is all we think about or enjoy thinking about. Heavenly topics are boring to people who are spiritually dead or spiritually immature. They simply don’t care about them; they think spiritual dynamics are irrelevant to their life. Heavenly facts are foreign to them, and they don’t understand spiritual realities.
- H. The habit of meditation involves seeing all of life through the perspective of God found in the Bible. We can’t only sit around and think about God all day, every day. That simply isn’t realistic with all of our other personal responsibilities. We must think about work when we are at work.

⁵ James 3:13-18

The purpose of this command is for disciples to focus their mind's attention on God as much as is possible given their unique life context. Perhaps there are responsibilities and activities we can cut out of our lives to prioritize God in our lives. Other responsibilities may be immovable. It is up to each disciple to figure out how to navigate their own life in a way that is pleasing to God. The hope is to learn and live with the mind of Jesus (1 Cor. 2:16).

III. Jesus' Habit of Meditation

- A. Like the habit of Bible study, we don't often see Jesus directly practicing meditation for His own personal benefit. Rather, we see the results of Jesus' times of meditation for the benefit of others. When Jesus gives us insight into how He sees the world and when we observe Jesus and how He teaches, it becomes obvious that He spent a lot of time thinking about God and heavenly things from the perspective of the Bible. Jesus has an amazing ability to connect everyday life with God and the kingdom of heaven. Regular and daily activities are viewed from the perspective of heaven in a remarkable way. Jesus explained spiritual truth and principles using common experiences of the physical world. He was able to do this consistently because of His habit of meditation.
- B. As George Swinnock points out, Jesus instructed His disciples through flowers, farming (seeds being planted in a field), trees, grapevines, business practices, the workplace, pearls, wheat and tares, cooking with leaven, a mustard seed, water, bread, fishing, salt, oil, lamps, and other everyday experiences.⁶ All of these various common activities were used by Jesus to help people understand God, how He works in the world, and how people should live for God.
- C. We are only going to be able to look at a few examples of the fruit of Jesus' habit of meditation. The first example comes from Jesus' most famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount. In this meditation, which comes in the form of preaching, Jesus compares disciples to a source of light (at this time, lamps were used). Jesus uses a common home object to explain what it means to live for God:

¹⁴ You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; ¹⁵ nor does *anyone* light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. ¹⁶ Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven. (Mt. 5:14-16)⁷
- D. Who is Jesus referring to when He says "You"? He is talking about disciples who are part of the kingdom of heaven described in verses 3-12, usually called the beatitudes. Jesus calls these types of individuals "the light of the world" (v. 14). Jesus goes on to describe how people used light in the first century—a lamp and a lampstand. Without electricity, people in first century Palestine had to use other methods to light up their dark, stone-walled, small-windowed homes. Jesus points out the purposes and functioning of lamps by pointing out the absurd behavior of lighting a lamp (using precious oil) only to put it in a place where it is not visible. The intended purpose of lighting a lamp is to be visible so that light is provided to those who need it.

⁶ George Swinnock, [*The Works of George Swinnock, M.A.*](#), vol. 2 (Edinburgh; London; Dublin: James Nichol; James Nisbet and Co.; G. Herbert, 1868), 416.

⁷ Jesus used the light imagery in a different way (Mk. 4:21-23).

- E. Jesus connected this everyday occurrence with God and His heavenly kingdom. Like lamps, which are a source of light in every home, so disciples who are part of the kingdom of heaven provide light to the world by carrying out God-inspired upright moral actions (v. 16). Disciples give other people reason to glorify God by living a godly life. In this way, disciples are the spiritual light of the world so others who need the light of heaven can begin to see. Clearly, Jesus had spent some time thinking about the daily activity of lighting a home and thought about it through a God-centered lens. Even though Jesus isn't actively participating in meditation while He is preaching, He is drawing from a time of meditation that He previously engaged in.
- F. Here is another example of Jesus using His own personal meditations to communicate truth to others. In this case, He is teaching the disciples in a small group context:
- ⁶ And Jesus said to them, "Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." ⁷ They began to discuss *this* among themselves, saying, "*He said that* because we did not bring *any* bread." ⁸ But Jesus, aware of this, said, "You men of little faith, why do you discuss among yourselves that you have no bread? ⁹ Do you not yet understand or remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets *full* you picked up? ¹⁰ Or the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many large baskets *full* you picked up? ¹¹ How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? But beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." ¹² Then they understood that He did not say to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. (Mt. 16:6-12)
- G. Jesus uses the most common food (bread) to communicate the importance of what people nourish their souls on. On several occasions, Jesus likened spiritual nourishment to physical nourishment, as He does once again here.⁸ Jesus meditated on eating physical food and saw a connection between eating food and caring for the soul. While Jesus is talking about leaven, He is referring to the teaching of the religious leaders—the groups of the Pharisees and Sadducees. As the disciples are still getting used to focusing their minds on heavenly (spiritual) topics, they think Jesus is talking about physical bread. The disciples assume Jesus is upset with them because they forgot to bring food for their trip (the disciples usually handled the logistics of the ministry). Jesus, however, is warning the disciples to be careful about the source of their information about God and the spiritual teachings they listen to and learn from, using leaven as a point of reference.
- H. Jesus is telling the disciples to nourish their souls with good spiritual teaching. This type of accurate God-centered instruction can't be found just anywhere. Jesus also warned the disciples of false teachers who claim to speak for God but do not. In Jesus' view, each person has the responsibility to be discerning when it comes to the spiritual instruction they accept and draw from. Not all messages about God are good. According to the leaven imagery, accepting incorrect teaching about God can taint a person's entire worldview and outlook on life—leaven spreads and affects the entire loaf of bread.⁹

⁸ Matthew 4:4, John 4:34

⁹ 1 Corinthians 5:6, Galatians 5:9

- I. In both instances, Jesus uses common, everyday experiences to explain important spiritual realities for the benefit of others. Jesus draws from what people are already familiar with to explain something new. He wants to make it easier for them to understand His teaching by building on and adding to what they already know. The reason Jesus was able to make these connections between the earthly and the heavenly is because Jesus spent time in meditation and viewed all of life through the perspective of God the Father.

IV. How to Practice Meditation

- A. There are generally two different forms of meditation. One form uses the Bible right in front of them (called deliberate meditation), while the other does not have the Bible in front of them (called occasional meditation). Our focus will be on the simpler form of meditation that doesn't require the Bible to be present (although occasional meditation is still connected to and based on the Bible—from memory). Any activity of life can be turned into an occasion of directing our thoughts to God and His truth by using occasional meditation. Daily experience is used to compare or contrast what is happening to us in our present circumstances to the truths presented by God in His word.
- B. This simple form of meditation is the EYE method. The first E in EYE stands for experience. Meditation begins with something that is happening to us in the present moment. Y stands for Yield to God. View and interpret the experience through the lens of God's perspective. The last E stands for Effect. This is where we ask ourselves how God's perspective will change how we respond to or appreciate our situation.
- C. Essentially, there are three steps in this basic form of meditation which can be done at any time because it doesn't require the Bible to be open. Start with experience by looking around at your current situation and make an observation about something you are sensing or thinking about. It could be something you see, hear, feel, smell, or taste and turn it to a spiritual use. What situation or experience am I focusing on? We take the earthly things that we are experiencing and use them as fuel for setting our minds on heavenly things. Normal, everyday experiences can be used as opportunities for spiritual growth. Use an activity that you are involved with as a starting point to turn your mind toward God. The object being focused on doesn't necessarily have to be outside us (although many times it is). It may even be something in us, such as a reaction, desire, motivation, feeling, or some other internal working.
- D. Once a sensation, activity, object, cause and effect relationship, character trait, or some other point of focus enters the mind, that thing (referent) is connected to a truth or spiritual principle related to God and His kingdom. Move from the earthly to the heavenly. How is my current condition connected to or viewed by God? We begin with creation or conscience and move to Scripture or knowledge of God. The gap between our lives and God's truth is bridged. In the physical, we see a parallel or a connecting point to something spiritual.
- E. The third and final element of this form of meditation involves moving from the truth of God to our response to that truth. What does God want me to do? How will this heavenly reality affect me? Meditation is not merely some intellectual exercise; the mental activity leads a person to live out the truth that is known. It becomes part of who they are. Meditation must always end in application or else the meditation is incomplete. The goal is not simply to know some facts, it

is to become someone that imitates Jesus. The Puritans thought one truth meditated on properly was more valuable than listening to many sermons, since attaining knowledge wasn't the primary goal, but being changed is. They believed life transformation didn't happen without meditation because truth must be digested and not simply chewed and spit out.

- F. The EYE method of meditation is a good tool to use when practicing meditation. It will help disciples learn how to set their mind on things above and focus their mental energy on God in a way that transforms them. Adding Bible study, prayer, and meditation to our regular spiritual habits will go a long way in shaping us to be the person God wants us to be. These are the three primary personal spiritual habits every disciple should practice.

V. Conclusion

- A. Jesus put the Father at the center of how He viewed everything. The perspective of Jesus saw the earthly through the lens of the heavenly. Both spheres were inseparably connected for Jesus. Jesus experienced flowers in a field and saw the loving and knowledgeable provision of God. Heavenly realities saturated Jesus' thoughts.
- B. Disciples will follow the example of Jesus and view all of life from the perspective of God by obeying the command to, ² "Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. ³ For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God." (Col. 3:2-3). Jesus changes what people think about because disciples' lives belong to Him.

VI. Questions for Further Thought

- A. What teaching of Jesus has special significance to you? How did Jesus communicate it?
- B. Look at other examples of Jesus' habit of meditation and identify: 1) the earthly point of reference and 2) the heavenly truth connected to that point of reference (Mt. 13:3-9, 13:24-30, 13:31-32, 13:33-34).
- C. What are the differences between earthly versus heavenly wisdom (Jas. 3:13-18)?
- D. What might encourage someone to spend time meditating?
- E. How could a disciple encourage the habit of meditation in their life?