

SERMON TITLE: "Improving Our Lives through Spiritual Disciplines: Reading the Bible"

SERMON TEXT: Nehemiah 7:73b – 8:12

PREACHER: Rev. Kim James

OCCASION: January 8, 2022, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

As this New Year gets started, we're talking about improving our lives through spiritual disciplines. Last Sunday, we received the sacramental elements of bread and grape juice and talked about how regular participation in Holy Communion improves our lives by positively connecting us with God, with a local community of faith, and with the wider church and world. Today, we move on to a second life-improving spiritual discipline: reading the Bible.

Our scripture from Nehemiah describes an event that happened about 450 years before Jesus. After living in Babylonian exile for several generations, some of the Jews had finally returned to their homeland and were rebuilding the city of Jerusalem and the temple. They knew they were supposed to worship God, but after all those years in exile, they were lacking in specifics. Since they didn't own personal copies of the scriptures, and most of the people were illiterate, they were dependent on their spiritual leaders to read the scrolls. So, the Jewish people gathered together and asked Ezra the priest to read the Law of Moses to them. Upon hearing God's word read to them for the first time—or for the first in a very long time—the people began to weep. The sacred scripture was going to require some changes in their behavior, both individually and as a people.

Ezra and the other leaders urged the people not to weep over their sins, but to rejoice at the opportunities before them. Now that the people had heard God's laws, they would have the ability to comply. Now was not the time for grieving. Now was the time to rejoice and celebrate the reading of God's word.

1—WHY?

Reading the Bible is an important and wonderful spiritual discipline for us today also. When we read the Bible, we improve our lives in a number of ways.

First of all, *reading the Bible teaches us to do the right things*. We learn in God's word to worship God alone and to give God priority over other affections. We are taught to be honest and respectful. We are called to love our neighbors and even our enemies. We are inspired by faithful and heroic people who obeyed God in spite of all odds.

Reading the Bible teaches us not to do the wrong things. The prohibitive laws like "Thou shalt not steal murder, lie, and cheat" clearly spell out a moral code that protects us from ourselves and each other. If we doubt the validity of those prohibitions, the Bible presents plenty of stories of people whose disobedience got them into serious trouble. When we learn these lessons of scripture, they can save us from a world of hurt.

Reading the Bible shapes our identity. The stories in the Bible are family narratives about our people. We read of weddings, births, reunions, funerals, and victory celebrations. These family stories help us claim our origins, values, beliefs, and traditions. They help us know who and whose we are.

Reading the Bible unites us together as a community of faith. Through our common scripture, we're united around one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and even one book. Within the Christian religion, there's a lot of room for different denominations and perspectives. But, by focusing our collective attention on the same sacred writings, we're a lot more likely to get along with each other and work side by side for the common good.

Reading the Bible gives us inspiration and hope. In my own personal devotions this week, I was reading from the Book of Daniel. When Daniel was discouraged and in mourning, God gave him a vision of a man who calmed his fears and gave him courage. The Bible is full of stories like that. Whenever God's people were discouraged by the difficulties they faced, God helped them overcome. It didn't

matter whether their troubles were hunger, thirst, sickness, persecution, plagues, poverty, oppression, infertility, storms at sea, or maligning of character. God came to their rescue. Even when Jesus was crucified on the cross, God raised him from the dead. Over and over again, the scriptures remind us that there's something better awaiting us. God's word lifts our spirits and gives us hope.

Reading the Bible also connects us with God. The Bible is not God, and we should be careful never to worship the Bible as infallible. But, like a light that shines on the good path, the Bible helps us find our way to the God who loves us, forgives us, and makes us holy.

2—HOW?

I think we all recognize many reasons *why* reading the Bible improves our lives. What becomes a stumbling block for us is *how* to read the Bible. So here are some suggestions that may give you more success.

First of all, *begin by reading whatever Bible you already have*—even if it's old and tattered, even if it's big and full of family pictures, even if you have to clean the dust off of it. The only way to read the Bible is to start doing it, beginning now. Some years ago, the American Bible Society indicated that 88% of American households possess one or more Bibles. Chances are pretty good that you have one. So, open it up and get to reading.

A second help to reading the Bible is to *buy yourself a newer translation*. My hunch is that many of you here today have not bought a new Bible for a number of years. That might be alright if you're reading your Bible successfully. But, if you're having trouble reading because the language sounds like Shakespeare, then spend 30 bucks and buy yourself a new one, in a modern translation that you can understand. Language evolves over time, and I guarantee that you'll get a lot more benefit from the 1989 New Revised Standard Version or the 2011 Common English Bible than you will if you're reading the 1609 King James Version. Contemporary translations also take into account new knowledge from archeological digs and recent learnings about how better to understand the ancient Hebrew and Greek languages.

As soon as I advise you to buy a new Bible, however, I have to admit that purchasing a Bible can be confusing and difficult. Like automobiles, Bibles come in makes and models and with a whole variety of features that will affect how you interact with your Bible and how much you're likely to read it. There isn't nearly enough time to explain all that to you in this sermon, so I've laid out some copies of a Bible translation comparison chart on the table in the back of the sanctuary. If you're seriously interested in buying a new Bible, speak with me after worship today or some other time, so I can help you acquire a new Bible that's best for you.

A third tip for reading the Bible is to *read it in a way that's appropriate for your experience level*. For those of us who have been reading the Bible seriously for decades, that might mean reading every verse of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation and studying all those verses carefully. For others, a modified overview of the Bible might be better. That's why I put out a Bible-reading schedule on the back table that will help you get through the highlights of the Bible in a year. If you're pretty new to Bible reading, however, even that schedule might not be best for you. For beginning Bible readers, it might be better to begin with the New Testament gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The stories of Jesus are simpler to read and comprehend.

Even if you've been reading the Bible for years, however, don't let yourself get bogged down in passages you don't understand or that seem boring. If a section has too many hard-to-pronounce names, just skip over it. The Bible has so many helpful verses, there's no point in wasting your time and efforts on the parts that don't make sense. One minister likened this practice to eating a fish. Don't let yourself choke by trying to swallow the bones, he said. Just pull off the meat and enjoy eating that. The 16th century Protestant reformer Martin Luther compared reading the Bible to picking apples off a tree. Shake the whole tree first, he said, so that the ripe apples can fall off easily. There'll be time later to climb up and search each branch.

Another suggestion for reading the Bible is to *read it every way you can*. Read it silently to yourself. Read it aloud to yourself. Read it aloud with your spouse. Read a children's Bible story book to your kids or grandkids. Read along silently while someone else is reading aloud. Read the Bible on your tablet or smart phone app. Those of you who like podcasts can listen to the Bible while you're commuting, cooking dinner, or out for a run. Use as many opportunities as you can to read God's word.

Finally, I suggest that you *read the Bible regularly*. Like any discipline, reading the Bible will become easier and more enjoyable if you exercise those muscles consistently. Some days it will seem like you just don't have the time. But I encourage you to make time anyway. Make a space in your day for Bible reading. For some people, it's easiest early in the morning, before other responsibilities crowd in. For others, it's easiest to read the Bible late at night, when the day's activities have ceased. Still others manage to carve out time in the middle of the day—maybe on your lunch break. It doesn't matter when. It just matters that you do it. Daily is best, but don't give up if you miss a day. Just make sure you don't miss out on multiple days in a row. The Bible is your spiritual food, and you need it on a regular basis.

CONCLUSION

Here at First United Methodist Church, we give out children's Bible story books, and I encourage the kids and their parents to read them regularly at home. Every so often, one of the children will tell me that they have finished reading the whole book. I congratulate them for that, and then suggest that they read it again and again. The Bible is so full of wonderful stories of truth and wisdom. There are so many gems and nuggets that we can't possibly find and absorb them all in a first or second or even 500th reading. As our life circumstances change, even very familiar passages provide new insights of wise guidance, needed correction, and inspirational encouragement. Absolutely, positively, we improve our lives through the spiritual discipline of reading the Bible.