

**DISCIPLINES FOR DEEPER DISCIPLESHIP, PART III:
AN HOUR WITH BOOKS...
A SERMON PREACHED AT FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH GREENWICH
FEBRUARY 17, 2008
THE LESSON FOR THE DAY—JOHN 1:43-51
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According to Richard Foster in his 1978 Christian classic *Celebration of Discipline*, Study is one of the twelve spiritual disciplines that might deepen our discipleship and enliven our walk with God. We Christians learned this from the Jews. The old rabbis used to say “An hour with books is as an hour at prayer.” Is that true for you? Have you ever been reading and suddenly it’s as if you’re praying, talking to God, connected to whatever invisible, impalpable world exists beyond the otherwise infrangible walls of space and time?

Have you ever been lost in the stacks of a library as if in an ecstatic trance? Have you ever been so deep into a research project it was as if you’d left your body behind for some other world? Conjure back for me to your twenty-first year, to your absolute favorite class at university, when some charismatic professor fired up your mind, maybe for the first time in your life, and you were thrilled by the joy of new discovery?

That’s why the 42nd Street Branch of the New York Public Library looks like a Temple, guarded by Fortitude and Patience, those cardinal virtues. That’s why the Rose Reading Room looks and feels like the Holy of Holies. My perfect day? Six hours on a Thursday in the Rose Reading Room, and then Evensong at St. Thomas’ Cathedral. Improbably, the very cerebral activity of Studying is one of the disciplines of the heart, of the spirit.

As the starting blocks for my short sprint into a study of study with you, I choose one of my favorite passages of Scripture, the story of Jesus calling Nathanael as one of his twelve disciples. Twelve disciplines, twelve disciples, you see how

easy it is? A discipline for every disciple; there’s one here for you.

I love Nathanael. I love Nathanael because he is a studier, he is a scholar. We don’t know much about Nathanael—John is the only Gospel who mentions him, and that only twice—we don’t know much about Nathanael, but we do know he was a scholar. How do we know that? There are a couple of clues in the text. First of all, we know Nathanael is a scholar because he is a cynic. Nathanael hears about this hot new rabbi in town, this popular new preacher named Jesus the paparazzi are stalking, and Nathanael gets all excited for a moment until he finds out that Jesus is from Nazareth, a hick town full of fishermen, carpenters, shopkeepers, and yahoos but no research university. Cambridge or Berkeley it ain’t. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” he sneers instantly and disdainfully. That’s the downside of the life of the mind—it makes you feel superior to the rest of us idiots. It makes you snotty. As I’ve said to you before, Nathanael begins his apostolic career with a smirk.

That’s the first clue: Nathanael might be a scholar because he is most certainly a snot. There’s another clue. When Jesus sees Nathanael walking down the road, Jesus instantly belts out, apropos of nothing at all, “Behold, an Israelite in whom there is no guile!”

“What you see is what you get!” shouts Jesus, and even though Nathanael thinks Jesus is a yahoo, he’s still genuinely flattered. He says to Jesus, “Do we know each other? How’d you get to reading my mail? Did you Google me? No, wait, the Internet hasn’t been invented yet.” Jesus replies, “I saw you sitting under the fig tree.” The

shade of a fig tree, as you've heard me say before, was a place for study. In the small, crowded, dark, close, almost windowless adobe homes of first-century Palestine, you see, the shade of a fig tree out front in the courtyard might be the best place to concentrate on your books: fresh air, lots of light, some space, peace and quiet.

Nathanael is a scholar, and of him Jesus boasts, "Behold, an Israelite in whom there is no guile." A life of the mind might lead to snobbery and false superiority, but on the positive side, it also issues unto thoughtfulness and carefulness. It secures against guile, or deceit. It defends us against the undue credulities of the gullible. It protects us from the fraudulence of religious hucksters and from the blindness of benighted believers still bellyaching about Darwin a hundred and fifty years after *Origin of Species*. It shields us from the baseless biases of bigots driven and riven by the wild, irrational passions of their own brutish hearts.

Nelson Mandela says that the first time he noticed a slight thawing in the icy relations between blacks and whites in South Africa was when he was treated in a Capetown hospital in 1985 near the end of his 27 years of imprisonment. The doctors and nurses treated him as a human being. For the first time in his life white people were treating him as an equal. He says, "It reaffirmed my belief that education was the enemy of prejudice. These were men and women of science, and science had no room for racism."¹ Among other things, study leaves no room for racism.

"Behold, an Israelite in whom there is no guile," boasted Jesus of Nathanael the snob and fig-tree scholar. Study, if we are careful, can lead to guilelessness. Do you think America could use a few more studious citizens just now? This is the country that gives the world such spectacular gifts as Dr. Phil, Jerry Springer, Miss Teen South Carolina, and ex-quarterback Joe Theismann, who

¹Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (Boston: Little Brown, 1994), p. 439.

once said, "Nobody in football should be called a genius. A genius is a guy like Norman Einstein." Well, I guess he proved his point. Forty-eight percent of the books sold in the United States are romance novels. The trouble is, as Victor Hugo pointed out in *Les Miserables*, "people do not read stupidities with impunity."² It really does matter what you read.

"*Are You Smarter Than a Fifth-Grader?*" a popular television show wants to know. Sadly, America answers with a resounding 'NO!' Maybe you saw the *New York Times* article on Thursday called "Dumb and Dumber: Are Americans Hostile to Knowledge?" Sadly, the answer seems to be a resounding "YES!" On *Are You Smarter Than a Fifth-Grader?*, American Idol Kellie Pickler faced an insurmountable question: "Budapest is the capital of which European country?" She threw up her hands and said, "I thought **Europe** was a country." When she found out the correct answer was Hungary, she replied, "Hungry?" H-U-N-G-R-Y. "I've heard of Turkey, but not Hungry."³ *Are You Smarter Than a Fifth-Grader?* *Jeopardy*, you know, is just too hard. Bob Woodward appeared on a celebrity episode of *Jeopardy* and missed a question about *All the President's Men*.⁴

Are Americans hostile to knowledge? Yes. But that, of course, is nothing new. It goes back to the beginning of our land, and has something to do with the wild, frontier nature of the continent. America is and always was a macho land, and spent the first hundred years of its history trying to prove to the world that it was not Europe. "We're not prancing effetes wearing lace collars

²Victor Hugo, *Les Miserables* (), p. 154.

³Patricia Cohen, "Dumb and Dumber: Are Americans Hostile to Knowledge?", *The New York Times*, February 14, 2008.

⁴Alessandra Stanley, "OK, Alex, Smart Nerds for \$1 Million," *The New York Times*, July 13, 2004.

and knee britches and white hosiery and taking snuff,” America spent a hundred years saying. Ralph Waldo Emerson, the beginning of the American intellectual tradition, was hostile to knowledge. One of Emerson’s most famous essays was “Self-Reliance.” Don’t lean on the stale thoughts of dead men, he always said. Don’t *read*. Don’t *study*. Think. Think for yourself. We’re not Europe, Emerson always wanted to say. “Who cares what the capital of Hungary is?” Emerson might have told Kellie Pickler. “Europe is past. Europe is dead. America is the future.” His idea of a great man was not Plato or Shakespeare but the man who stands in the gap to separate a great herd of cattle thundering down on him at a frantic gallop.⁵ “Books,” he said, “are for the scholar’s idle times. When we can read God directly, the hour is too precious to waste in other men’s transcripts.”⁶ “Books are the for the scholar’s idle times.” He said that in 1837 but do you know where? He detonated that bombshell at the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard College. What a brave man. Americans have always been hostile to knowledge.

But now after 200 years, after Miss Teen South Carolina and Kellie Pickler and Jerry Springer, perhaps we’ve proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that we’re not intellectuals and we’re not effete Europeans, so maybe the time has come to devote ourselves to the spiritual discipline of study, because people do not read stupidities with impunity.

⁵Ralph Waldo Emerson, in *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph L. Rusk (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), vol. 4, p 528, quoted by Robert D. Richardson, Jr., in *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1994, p. 481.

⁶Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” Address delivered to the Phi Beta Kappa Society in Cambridge, MA., August 31, 1837, in *The American Tradition in Literature*, eds. George and Barbara Perkins (New York: McGraw Hill, Inc., 1994, eighth edition), vol. I, pp. 1122-1123.

So here’s a modest program of self-improvement, here’s a modest program in the cultivation of the spiritual discipline of Study. Read the Bible. I’m not kidding. All of it. From cover to cover. You don’t have to do it by Easter. Just do it before you die. Most of you have years. Don’t you think you ought to have a thorough acquaintance with what Christians claim is the very word of God Godself?

Read a chapter a day. Miss a day, you gotta make it up the next day. There are 1,189 chapters in the Bible. If you start tomorrow with Genesis 1, you’ll reach Revelation chapter 22 on May 22, 2011. Read a psalm a day. There are 150 of them. When you get to Psalm 150, don’t quit; do it again; twice a year. By the time you’re 70 you’ll practically know them by heart. Read five Proverbs a day. There are about 700 of them; that’ll keep you busy till Labor Day or maybe Thanksgiving.

If that sounds like too much for you, at the very least you should read Genesis, Exodus, the Gospel of Luke, and Paul’s letter to the Romans. That’s a terse précis of the whole Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Luke, and Romans.

If you need some help, join a Bible Study. If that sounds like a radical proposal, let me assure you that, contrary to popular opinion, this roof will not fall in if you show up at church when it’s not Sunday morning.

Subscribe to *The Christian Century*, the most intelligent Christian journal you can read without a theological education. Don’t read *Christianity Today*; you’ll die of boredom; nor *Theology Today*; you’ll die of exertion.

Read a poem a day: George Herbert, John Donne, Emily Dickinson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, T.S. Eliot, Jane Kenyon, Mary Oliver, Billy Collins. You know what’s a great book? *Good Poems*, edited by Garrison Keillor, hundreds of good poems selected by a thoughtful man with an omniverous intelligence. William Carlos Williams said: “It is difficult/to get the news from

poems/yet men die miserably every day/for lack/of what is found there.”⁷

Get to know the word, and get to know the world. God has made us responsible for God’s world, so we may as well get to know it. Read a daily, a weekly, a monthly, a quarterly, and as many books as you can, anything but romance novels or pornography. But I repeat myself. Read *The Times*, *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, and Isaacson’s new biography of Einstein (Albert not Norman). Read *The Journal*, *Newsweek*, *The National Geographic*, and *Mayflower* by Philbrick, or *Guns, Germs and Steel* by Diamond, or *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* by Landes, or *Carry Me Home* by McWhorter, the other McWhorter. Set yourself a goal. I’m a slow reader, so my goal is modest: thirty books a year; some of you can read a hundred.

Read some spiritual classics. You could read Augustine’s *Confessions*, Luther’s *Table Talk*, Pascal’s *Pensées*, Lewis’ *Mere Christianity*, Borg’s *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. Here’s a proposal: you could buy me lunch. No, you don’t have to buy me lunch; actually I’ve given up lunch for Lent. Buy me a Starbucks, and we’ll construct a spiritual reading program.

When you read, look for God. I heard a woman say that once and it’s always stuck with me. “When I read, I look for God.”⁸ It’s another way of saying “An hour with books is as an hour at prayer.” When you read, do you look for God? Do you seek out Gospel-shaped books and stories? I don’t mean necessarily books *about* the Gospel, but books that are informed by the Good

News of God’s extravagant grace, books that are shaped like Jesus’ own finest story—the story of a thoughtless child who squanders his inheritance on riotous living but then when he comes to himself and returns home, the waiting father runs to meet him while he is yet far off. You know what I mean: *Les Miserables*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Huck Finn*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Mr. Ives’ Christmas*, *Gilead*.

So, when you read, look for God. That’s when you’ll discover why Study is one of the twelve spiritual disciplines. Virginia Woolf said,

I have sometimes dreamt...that when the Day of Judgement dawns and the great conquerors and lawyers and statesmen come to receive their rewards—their crowns, their laurels, their names carved indelibly upon imperishable marble—the Almighty will turn to Peter and will say, not without a certain envy when he sees us coming with our books under our arms, “Look, these need no reward. We have nothing to give them here. They have loved reading.”⁹

Said Jesus to Nathanael, the cynic, student, and scholar: “Greater things than these will you see. Truly I tell you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” Maybe in this spiritual life of study, we have already seen the heavens opened and the angels descending. Maybe we have already received our reward.

⁷Quoted by Michael Roberts at PEN World Voices: The New York Festival of International Literature in April, 2005. Mr. Roberts in turn was quoted in an article by Dinitia Smith, “A Crowd That’s Seldom at a Loss for Words,” *The New York Times*, April 23, 2005.

⁸Suzanne Britt, “With Blue Bones and Flaming Heart,” *Books and Reviews*, Fall, 1989.

⁹Virginia Woolf, “How Should One Read a Book,” in *The Second Common Reader*, quoted by Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1994), 443.