

“Reading Good Books”
(Ephesians 4:7-16)

I. Introduction.

A. Orientation.

1. We’ve been looking at walking with God alone.
 - a. We’ve seen that this is the time we need to be on our guard against the enemy, because he’ll take advantage of it.
 - b. We’ve seen that we need to be moving in a positive direction: since then it will be harder for him to tempt us.
2. Of the positive things we can do, we’ve seen that reading the Bible is one excellent use of time alone.
 - a. We considered some of the reasons we should read the Bible: love, duty, it’s the means the Spirit uses to convert and sanctify, safety.
 - b. And we considered how to read it to get the most benefit: by realizing what it is and what it’s able to give us, by praying beforehand, and by hungering and thirsting for it (this is the outgrowth of love).

B. Preview.

1. This evening, we’re going to look at another good way to use our time alone: by reading good books.
2. We’ll see three things:
 - a. First, why we should read good books.
 - b. Second, how we should read to get the greatest benefit.
 - c. And third, the proper use of books.

II. Sermon.

A. First, why should we read good books?

1. Why not only read the Bible?
 - a. Why do we need to read the uninspired writings of human authors?
 - b. Why should we read creeds or catechisms?
 - c. Isn’t the Bible enough?
2. The Bible certainly is sufficient for life and godliness.
 - a. Paul writes to Timothy, “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17).
 - b. The Bible is the only infallible source of truth regarding God and His will. (Of course, everything it says is true).
3. But we can also benefit from good books. Our text tells us, “And He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and some *as* pastors

and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:11-12).

- a. The Lord knew we wouldn’t be able to learn all we needed to know on our own, or learn it as well, unless we had teachers.
 - (i) Just about everything we know we’ve learned from someone else.
 - (ii) We can see things much faster when they’re pointed out to us.
 - (iii) And when we hear things that are wrong, they can provoke us in the right directions.

- b. What is a book except teaching put down in writing so that the whole church can be edified by these insights into Scripture until Christ comes again?
 - (i) When Christ gives a gifted teacher, such as an Edwards or an Owen or Baxter, if they commit their teaching to writing, they become a gift, not just for the people they ministered to, but to the church as a whole.
 - (ii) Richard Baxter, in his *Christian Directory*, writes, “If other books were not needful, teachers were not needful; for writing is but the most advantageous way of teaching by fixed characters, which fly not from our memory as transient words do. And who is it that understands the Scriptures that never had a teacher? And why said the eunuch, ‘How should I (understand what I read) unless some man guide me?’ And why did Christ set teachers in his church to the end, till it be perfected, if they must not teach the church unto the end? Therefore they may write unto the end” (586).
 - (iii) We should read good books written by gifted teachers because they are God’s gift to us to help us understand Scripture.

B. Second, how should we read to get the greatest benefit?

1. First, you should read only the best books.
 - a. There are so many books.
 - (i) Solomon could say this in his own day: “The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of *these* collections are like well-driven nails; they are given by one Shepherd. But beyond this, my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion *to books* is wearying to the body” (Ecc. 12:11-12).
 - (ii) Why waste your time reading anything but the best?

 - b. What books should we read? Baxter’s advice here is good.
 - (i) He writes, “The poorest library is, 1. The Sacred Bible. 2. A Concordance . . . 3. A sound Commentary or Annotations . . . 4. Some English catechisms, (the Assemblies’ two, Mr. Gouge’s, Mr. Crook’s Guide) . . . Amesius’s Marrow of Theology and Cases of Conscience . . . 5. Some of the soundest English books which open the doctrine of grace, justification, and free-will and duty . . . 6. As many affectionate practical English writers as you can get . . .” (587).
 - (ii) He goes on to mention some authors with which we’re familiar: William Gurnall, John Preston, Richard Sibbes, Robert Bolton, Henry Scudder,

John Howe, George Swinnock, Anthony Burgess, William Perkins, Jeremiah Burroughs, Thomas Hooker, James Janeway, Thomas Vincent, Samuel Rutherford; to which we could add, Jonathan Edwards, John Owen, John Bunyan, Thomas Watson, Richard Baxter, Thomas Brooks, J. C. Ryle, C. H. Spurgeon, and more modern authors, such as R. C. Sproul and John Gerstner.

(iii) He also tells us we should add an encyclopedia and lexicons.

- c. Remember, though, the best for you isn't always the best for everyone.
 - (i) It really depends on where you are in your spiritual growth and intellectual development.
 - (ii) You need to read the best books that you are able to understand.
 - (iii) It takes time to be able to digest the stronger meat of the best writers.
 - (iv) Until then, read the books that will help you the most.

2. Second, when you read a book, make sure you take the time to understand it.

- a. Reading good books on spiritual subjects is not like reading a novel. With a novel you can afford to day dream, miss some words, not understand everything.
- b. With spiritual/doctrinal books, you need to make sure you stay tuned in and follow the whole train of thought until you understand thoroughly what you've read.
- c. Even mastering one good book can be a great help.
 - (i) Thomas Aquinas is famous for his quote, "Beware the man of one book."
 - (a) Some believe he meant that a man of one book doesn't know much and so you should be careful of him (for his ignorance).
 - (b) But what he really meant was that a man who has thoroughly mastered one good book can be a formidable opponent.

- (ii) Alexander Pope, the 18th Century English poet, put it this way,
 A little learning is a dang'rous thing;
 Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring*:
 There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
 And drinking largely sobers us again. — *Essay on Criticism*, Part ii.15.
 (*The metaphorical source of knowledge about art and science)

Though we might not agree with his theology, what he says here is true.

- (iii) Baxter writes, "It is not the reading of many books which is necessary to make a man wise or good; but the well reading of a few, could he be sure to have the best" (585).
- (iv) If you spend time reading too many books, but master none, your knowledge will only be partial and not nearly as useful.
- (v) Find a book that's worth reading and then strive to understand it thoroughly.

3. Third, don't reject what you read because you don't know or don't like the author, but on the other hand, don't accept everything you read because you do know or like him.
 - a. First, don't reject what someone has written just because you don't respect that author.
 - (i) It's true that even the worst authors sometimes hit on the truth.
 - (a) Even a broken clock is right at least twice a day.
 - (b) It's not that you should read these authors, since this violates the maxim of reading the best books you can.
 - (c) Jacobus Arminius didn't get everything wrong, neither did Charles Finney; but that doesn't mean we should read them, especially when there are much better books available.
 - (ii) Sometimes we don't want to read the book of a man we should respect.
 - (a) An Arminian might not want to read Calvin, but he should, if Calvin in fact has written a book that will help him understand the Bible more accurately.
 - (b) If the universal testimony of the church is that a certain book is useful, we should definitely consider it.
 - b. On the other hand, don't accept everything your favorite author might have to say. This is erring on the other side, and is much more common.
 - (i) Sometimes we can admire someone so much that we accept whatever he says uncritically. That's what happens today in so many churches with modern Evangelical leaders.
 - (ii) But even Homer sometimes nods – even the best teachers and writers can sometimes be very wrong.
 - c. How can we avoid either pitfall?
 - (i) We must never accept anything anyone says, just because they say it – even if it's someone we respect or admire – we should only receive what they say if it agrees with Scripture or sound reason (according to the Word of God).
 - (ii) It was this kind of precaution that made Luther stand his ground and not yield to the authority and power of the church. “Unless I am convinced by the testimonies of the Holy Scriptures or evident reason (for I believe in neither the Pope nor councils alone, since it has been established that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures that I have adduced, and my conscience has been taken captive by the Word of God; and I am neither able nor willing to recant, since it is neither safe nor right to act against conscience. God help me. Amen.”
 - (iii) We need to stand on Scripture; that is all the teachers of the church are authorized to teach:
 - (a) “To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn” (Isa. 8:20).

- (b) “But Jesus answered and said to them, ‘You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures nor the power of God’” (Matt. 22:29).
- (c) This is where we must stand.
 - (1) If a lowly servant of Christ speaks God’s truth, then we need to receive it.
 - (2) But even if the author we respect more than any other says something contrary to it, we must reject it. “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!” (Gal. 1:8).
 - (3) This is all the more reason to make sure we keep up our Bible reading, so that we will be able to discern between truth and error.

C. Finally, what is the proper use of books?

1. Books are good and can be very helpful if they are kept in their proper place.
 - a. We should use them when we are alone, along with our Bible reading, to grow in our understanding and obedience to God’s Word.
 - b. But we are not to use them as a substitute for public worship and the public preaching of God’s Word.
 - (i) You might if you happened to live where there was no true church, or if you were sick and couldn’t make it to the service.
 - (ii) But where the people of God are meeting for worship, we must not substitute private reading for the public proclamation of God’s Word.
 - (iii) The Lord has not commanded us to get alone by ourselves to read or to pray on the Lord’s Day during the services, but He has commanded that we meet together for prayer, worship and hearing God’s Word read and preached, not to mention fellowship with the saints. (Heb. 10:25).
2. Our reading shouldn’t keep us from public worship, but rather should give us a hunger for it.
 - a. It shouldn’t lead us into disobedience, but into obedience to God’s will.
 - b. If we stay home and read, when the saints are gathering for worship, the Lord won’t bless our reading or our prayers ((Prov. 28:9).
 - c. Very often this leads us away from the truth rather than towards it.
 - d. So when you have time alone, read the best books you can, read them thoroughly until you’ve mastered them, but make sure you compare everything they say with Scripture and don’t accept what they say unless it agrees with God’s Word, and they will help you grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.