



**Study and the Reality of God**  
**Philippians 3:4b-14**

Dr. Ryan N. Danker

Washington Street UMC

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It's my job to make people study whether they really want to or not. And so when Thomas asked me to preach on the concept of "study," I thought it made sense. At the Seminary, I do have a reputation of sorts. Apparently, it's difficult to pass my classes. But if I'm to have any reputation, I could have done worse.

So I agreed to the task of preaching today, and then he told me that I had to give a sermon and not a lecture, which is not always the easiest thing for a professor to do. But as I'm in the pulpit at the moment and he's not, we'll see what comes out.

Either way, he's saved you from any sort of final exam. At least today.

But when we think of study, as Christians, I hope that the first thing you thought of was the bible. Christians are people of the book, as they say. It doesn't matter what form it comes in. Originally it was scrolls, then large tomes, then it was hand-held leather editions, and on and on until we got to electronic books, which we were told would take over the world.

Thankfully, that has not been the case. Give me my leather-bound bible.

But we *are* people of the book; and in particular the Bible. It's not a Methodist thing or even a Protestant thing it's simply a Christian thing. We can't get away from it. And, we shouldn't want to.

When I was a religion major in undergrad – a freshman, in fact – we were required to take Old Testament in the Fall semester and New Testament in the Spring. Unlike the non-religion majors who were able to take a one-semester overview of biblical literature, we religion majors were given no such leisure. And New Testament was what they called a "weed-out" class. It was designed on purpose to thin the ranks of religion majors.

And, it worked. Forty-percent of students failed that course. And the calling they thought they had to be ministers and religion professors quickly found expression in any number of other professions.

I tell you that story, not to say that the clergy or seminary professors should know more about the bible, because that's simply not true. I tell that story because I wish that every Christian could pass such a rigorous examination of holy scripture. That should be the aim of us all, even if it's demanded of some.

In all my years of studying the history of the Church, the figures of church history, the saints, the great minds, hearts, and lives of those who have given themselves over to Christ, not one of them did so without immersing themselves in the study of scripture.

Scripture and the life of holiness – the life to which we are all called – go hand in hand.

And we can see this in the text that Lindsey read from St. Paul's letter to the Philippians.

Paul is reminding the Christians of Philippi of the uniqueness of the Gospel and how it sets them apart from the patterns of the world.

In the first chapter, Paul writes about how his preaching and way of life have brought many of the Roman guards who were his captors to the knowledge of Christ. He tells them "Let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ."

He writes to them in the second chapter about being lights to the world, humble, and filled with compassion for one another. It is in the second chapter that we see the famous words, "let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus."

When we arrive at chapter three, today's lesson, Paul is encouraging the Philippians to rejoice in Christ, to leave behind our own status, our accomplishments, and our glory, for the one who is the only Savior and in who's death and resurrection new life, authentic life, is now possible.

One key to this third chapter, and something that reminded me of the need for Christian study, is the words of Paul when he wrote "Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected, but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. . . . I press toward the goal of the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

This text isn't usually equated with studying, because Paul is not talking about studying, but rather running and athletic competition.

You can almost imagine the Olympian runners that he had in mind. And it's not too difficult to understand why. They're disciplined. They're focused. They are driven by goals that would make other wince.

It reminds me of the time when I lived in Boston as a graduate student. Tomorrow is the Boston Marathon. And, in fact, a member of this congregation will be running in it.

But as someone who lived in Boston, you could always tell when the Marathon – always held on Patriots' Day – was about to be held. The city would be inundated with runners. And, you could tell who they were. They didn't look like us. They were fit. Their lives had been shaped by their goals. It was obvious.

There's a level of discipline necessary in mastering anything. The now famous story of the person who asked for directions to Carnegie Hall who received the answer "practice, practice, practice," should remind us of this.

When I see my students graduate from the Seminary at the National Cathedral, I'm reminded of this. We even say that they have become masters of divinity.

But note what Paul was talking about before he arrived at the running analogy. He was talking about having the mind that was in Christ.

Now, before we slip into any heresies, let me make it clear that you cannot earn or discipline yourself enough to have the mind of Christ. It simply isn't in our power. It, like all of salvation, is gift.

But at the same time, just like any gift, it has to be received and it is necessary, even having received it, to use it, to be responsible with it.

So as God has offered us the gift of salvation, he has also offered us the grace, the empowerment, to, in the words of Paul, work out our salvation with fear and trembling.

And this, the fear and trembling part, as I've been told, sounds a bit more like studying.

As I'm sure you've noticed, the sermon series that we have embarked on is about the practices of the Christian life. Last week my colleague, Prof Gina Campbell, led us through an instructed worship service, reminding us of the reasons we worship and of its transforming power.

This week, we are on the topic of study. Next week, we move onto another element of the Christian life. But you will have no doubt noticed that we're not really just talking about practices, we are talking about something much deeper.

This is, in fact, a series on holiness or holy living.

This is a Methodist church, after all, and Wesley founded the Methodists to be a reviving force within the church and to "spread scriptural holiness across the land."

But having been called to holiness. The question then remains, how do we arrive at such a state. How do we "press on toward the goal," or "move on toward perfection," to use Wesley's terms. How is it that perfect love becomes the reigning attribute of our hearts and not sin?

The answer to that is not simple, but it is a movement of grace. It is the gift of God. And God has given us means by which to keep pressing forward.

Last week, we talked about two of those means: the necessity of corporate worship (no one can move toward Christlikeness on their own) and also the gift of Holy Communion, that place, that event where God has promised to meet us in transforming ways through something as common as bread and wine.

Today, I want to encourage the use of another means, and that is scripture.

The scripture is a gift. But how often do we use it?

I'm reminded of when televisions used to be about as deep as they are wide. And the spot on top of the TV often said a great deal about the family.

In many Southern homes, you would find on top of the TV a shine of sorts, with a large Family Bible sitting on top, often flanked by candles.

I'm still not sure that this was a great place for the Word of God, but it meant something to them. It was prominent. It was also prone to be covered with dust.

Dusty bibles are not a means of grace.

One of the gifts of the Wesleyan revival has been a renewed emphasis on our grace-enabled responsibility in the process of salvation. And if it's easier, think of salvation as a relationship.

This is a useful analogy. We are to be in a transforming relationship with God. And by faith in Jesus that has been made possible.

Relationships change people. No matter the type of relationship, whether friendship or marriage, or something else, a relationship is a way of coming to know another person in all their wonderful detail, including the way they think.

My parents are a good example. They do everything together. They have a wonderful relationship. And if I were to ask one of them what the other might think, they'd know. Year after year their marriage has grown deeper. And it's not just that they know what kind of salad dressing the other would like (Dad would be Thousand Island and Mom would be Blue Cheese, by the way), it's deeper than that. It's a beautiful sharing, an engagement with the other that has made them better people. They have richer lives because of the other.

And that is a good picture of what our relationship with God should be like. But here's the difference; to know another person is to share life with them. To know God, and the mind of Christ, is share in God's reality.

The scripture is not simply a collection of stories about the encounters that people have had with God. It's not simply the eyewitness accounts of the life of Jesus, although it is that. It's not simply a moral manual. It is the divine mind in the form of text.

Jesus is the Word of God incarnate, made flesh. Tangible. The Bible is the Word of God written, made plain and accessible.

Revelation isn't something that simply sits. It's not a one-off sort of affair. The revelation of God is his self-revelation, which means that it's an engagement with God himself.

For this reason, I always tell every one of my classes to never lose their love for the scriptures.

If we lose our love for the scriptures, we have lost so much more than we can ever imagine.

The problem is not simply that we lose access to the mind of Christ (which is to be found in every portion of scripture, whether Old or New Testament), but we are then shaped by other narratives and other voices.

The reality to which the scriptures point is not the reality of social media, our political parties, or common sense. God simply doesn't aim to please our expectations.

The scriptural narrative gives an entirely different view. And, it challenges us at every turn. It doesn't confirm us in our thinking. It's not like a liberal watching MSNBC or a conservative reading William F. Buckley, Jr. A true reading of scripture calls us not to embrace our own interests, but the interests of God.

Think of it this way, only God would call a wayward tribe to be his own and expect them to bless the whole world. Only God would expect a virgin teenager to raise his only-begotten Son. Only God would show up in the backwater of the ancient world and expect to transform human hearts. Only God would die on a cross and in the process tear down sin and death in a heap. And only God would God start a revolution in a graveyard that would unleash the new creation. And only God would call people like you and people like me to be a part of that reality.

So where do we start? We start with prayer. The same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead inspired the authors of Scripture. And that same Spirit is available to you today. Ask God to send his Spirit that you might see clearly what God has for you in the scriptures.

Secondly, approach the scriptures not with a lens of critique, but with a lens of appreciation.

No one who receives a letter from a loved-one, reads it with suspicion, and yet we have the ultimate love letter written to each of us by God himself.

Academics have used critical approaches to the scriptures in their own work and it has produced some good results. But there is a limit to the benefits of critical academic study. If you need to hear that the scriptures are accurate, that they accurately portray the life of Jesus, as an historian I can tell you that they do. But you shouldn't place your faith in the work of scholars alone, nor ultimately. The value of scripture depends not on the word of an historian. Look at the millions of lives changed by them. That is a much better foundation.

Having prayed and having come to the scriptures with a lens of appreciation, they need to become our daily refuge. Only then will they become a means of grace. Only then will the mind of Christ begin to be formed in us, transforming us, changing us, into that person God is calling each of us to be.

Only then will God's reality begin to dawn in our hearts.

So friends, if someone asks you later what the sermon was about, let me summarize it for you: read your bible.

The Exam will come later. But it won't be written. It'll come when its least expected, and the outcome will be obvious. It'll be made plain to saint and sinner alike. Immersion in God's reality makes an unmistakable mark.

Amen.