

Engage in the Word of God
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Sunday, December 30, 2018

It's encouraging to me to be able to be with you on this last Sunday of the year. It's uncommon for me to be here on this last Sunday of the year because of family living out of state. We've used that Sunday to travel for holidays, but I really felt compelled a few weeks ago to be here on this day to begin a new sermon series. I don't think I've ever done this before. I've never began a new sermon series on the last Sunday of the year. But we're going to take four weeks in looking at God's word and we're going to think about this word "engage." I want to call you and challenge you to engage in the new year in a new way, in a fresh way, in a raising the bar kind of way when it comes to serving Christ and living for Christ and making His name known. Today, I want to invite you to open your bibles to Psalm 119.

My goal today is straightforward. I don't want to take too long getting to it. I just want to say right up front that my goal today is to encourage you and equip you in a way that leads to enthusiastic engagement in the word of God. I want to call you to engage in the word of God in 2019, and I want to share some things with you that I hope will be encouraging to you to make a fresh commitment to daily feeding on the word of God. I want to offer some things that maybe will equip you to do that and to be ready to do that as the new year starts. I'm excited about what is on my heart personally to be able to engage the word of God and study the word of God this year. And I hope that the Spirit of God would work in your heart in the same way today and that you would leave looking forward to how you're going to spend the days of 2019 daily in the Word.

Listen real close. There is no hesitation about this statement. I don't believe there's any exaggeration in this statement. There is nothing you do in 2019 that will be more life giving, life changing and life fulfilling than daily engaging the word of God. And so when you think about the year ahead, do you want the year ahead to be life giving? Are there some things in your life that need to change? Are there some things that you think about in 2019 and say to yourself, "I want to live a life that's fulfilling?" I want to tell you that it starts and ends with daily feeding on the word of God. So make a commitment today. Before you leave the room today, make a commitment on how you will feed daily on the Word of God.

Now, I'm not asking you to commit to read the Bible through from Genesis to Revelation in a year. I'm not asking you to commit to read the New Testament through in the new year. I'm not asking you to commit to read the book of Psalms or Proverbs. I'm not asking you to commit 30 minutes every day to the Word of God. What I'm asking you to do is to ask the Spirit of God, because if you're a follower of Christ, the Spirit of God lives in you. Ask the Spirit of God, "How should I engage the word of God in 2019?" Then listen for Him to counsel you. Listen for Him to speak to you, to guide you and make that commitment today on how you will feed daily on the word of God. Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in God's word. It is 176 verses. In those 176 verses, it gives to us and establishes for us the value of God's word. If you've ever wondered the difference that God's word can make, just read through Psalm 119. And over and over and over again in those

176 verses, you will find the fruit of God's word. You'll find the results of God's word. You'll find what comes from the intake of God's Word, the application of God's Word and the living out of God's Word, feeding on the Word of God and living by the Word of God, the fruit is laid out for you. Look, we could pick any section of Psalm 119. It's divided up, and each section has a heading of a different Hebrew letter. It's organized in a very structured way. Look at Psalm 119:105. Just a few verses here show us the value of the word of God.

Psalm 119:105 says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."

If you've ever hit a piece of furniture in the dark, you know how valuable a light and a lamp can be.

Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.
I have sworn an oath and confirmed it,
to keep your righteous rules.
I am severely afflicted;
give me life, O Lord, according to your word!
Accept my freewill offerings of praise, O Lord,
and teach me your rules.
I hold my life in my hand continually,
but I do not forget your law.
The wicked have laid a snare for me,
but I do not stray from your precepts.
Your testimonies are my heritage forever,
for they are the joy of my heart.
I incline my heart to perform your statutes
forever, to the end.

His word, His righteous rules, His law, His precepts, His testimonies, His statutes - all of those are words that refer to the Word of God. How will you engage the Word of God? We see here the value of the Word of God. We're not going to read all of Psalm 119 today, but I took some time and I did that. As I read from verse 1-176, all of the different benefits of the word of God are listed out. The fruit of the Word, the result of the Word, the impact of the Word. Listen to what jumps out. There are one word descriptions of the fruit of God's Word. Ask yourself as you hear these, "Is that something that I need in my life? Is that something that my family needs? Is that something that my career needs? Is that something that needs to happen in the world?" Here's what I saw as I read through this chapter.

I find that the fruit of the Word of God is that we will be blessed. You have the opportunity to be blameless. You find guidance in the Word of God. If you apply the Word of God, you have the opportunity to be shameless. There is uprightness, purity, delight, counsel, life, understanding, strength, faithfulness, selflessness, reverence, steadfastness, boldness, trust, hope, comfort, obedience, singing, satisfaction, wisdom, and salvation.

Those are 24 results of the Word of God -of applying the Word of God, of reading the Word of God, and of engaging the Word of God. One of those verses in Psalm 119 speaks about how salvation can come to us through the Word of God. In a room this size on this last Sunday of the year, it's very possible that you've come in here and you have never received Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. What we find in the Word of God is a way for your sins to be forgiven for eternity. We find in the Word of God a way for you to be reconciled to God. Our sin separates us from God. Your sin separates you from God. We find in the Word of God the stories of Jesus being promised and Jesus coming and being born like we celebrated at Christmas. We also find the stories of His life and His death, His burial, and His resurrection back to life. We learn in God's word that His death on the Cross atoned for our sin, satisfied the wrath of God and made a way by faith in Him, for us to be forgiven forever and to live every day until we see Him with the hope of eternal life.

Salvation - why not receive Him today? Why not call out to Him today as a teenager, as an 80-year-old man at any age in between and just say to Him, "Save me today! Let me settle it this last Sunday of the year, that forever I would know Christ, as my Lord and Savior."

Those are the riches that we get from the word of God, but it doesn't stop there. Keep reading through Psalm 119, and you will find that the fruit of the Word is knowledge, mercy, protection, holiness, direction, worship, joy, stability, security, safety, goodness, perspective, light, grace, redemption, favor, humility, intimacy, deliverance, truth, rejoicing, peace, help, forgiveness. Right there are 48 things that are listed there as fruit of the Word of God. As you think about any of those, do you think, "I sure hope 2019 might be filled with peace or security or forgiveness, grace, mercy, comfort, direction, guidance?" All of those things come together by engaging the Word of God, embracing the Word of God. It doesn't happen just by the book laying there on the shelf or just sitting there on the phone. We have to engage the Word.

So I'm calling on you. How will you read the Word, how will you study the Word? How will you apply the Word? How will it be a part of your daily feeding for your soul? Now there are some excuses that come up. You say, "You want me to do that daily?" I'm calling you to do it daily. Why would I not? If the fruit is so great and the value is so rich, why would I not want to shepherd you in that direction?

You may say, "Well, I don't understand it." That's okay. Let me tell you that it's that way for me. I'll have some passage of scripture that I'm reading and I'll finish it and look at it and say, "I'm not preaching that. I don't understand that." But I still read it. There are a lot of things I read that I don't understand. But the next verse I may understand. And the next verse I may understand, and by the time I get to three books later, I might understand what was three books back, but I didn't until I had read what was three books ahead.

We don't have to understand it all, but as we read, the Holy Spirit will over time give us understanding. You say, "I don't have time." Well, what do you have time for? Honest question. What do you have time for? We have time to work. We have time to eat. We have time to sleep. We

have time to be on our phone or on a computer. We have time to drive. We have time to cheer our teams. We have time to watch TV. We have time to take a trip or trips. What do you have time for? Maybe you just need less of any one of those in order to prioritize something that is so valuable and rich as engaging in the Word of God. The thing is that as you read the Word and it begins to transform you and have an impact on you, what you find is that you begin to prioritize the reading of the Word. Because you begin to realize in your life, I'm too busy *not* to read the word of God. It's too valuable for it not to have an impact on my daily life.

Excuses for not reading the Word of God fade as you read the Word of God. As you read the Word of God, it steals the excuses away because of the impact of the transforming work of the Word of God. The Apostle Paul wrote a lot of letters in the New Testament. He had a first letter and he had a last letter. The very last letter he wrote not long before he died was the letter to Timothy. This is the book of 2nd Timothy. In 2nd Timothy he's saying, if you will, his last will and testament to this young pastor named Timothy. He made some declarations about scripture and the Word of God.

Listen to 2nd Timothy 3:16: "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete equipped for every good work." What stands out to you? Is it that the word of God is good for reproof or it's good for training? What stands out? What stands out to me is that phrase, it says that "the man of God may be complete." It's this encouragement of spiritual growth, of being transformed and being changed and being shaped and molded into Christ's likeness. Of being the complete picture of what Christ had in mind when He came for you and died for you and saved you. And now, He's waiting on you in heaven. So if you say, "I want to grow spiritually. I want to see my life changed. I want to see my world changed," then read the Word. It's the work of the Word that does the work in our life.

Martin Luther said many, many years ago about preaching the Word and teaching the Word: "Me? I did nothing. It was the Word that did the work." Hebrews 4:12 says, "The word of God is living and active, sharper than a two edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

Do you know what happens as you read the Word of God? The Word of God reads you. And as you read the Word of God and the Word of God reads you, this living and active and sharp word of God begins to work like holy sandpaper, sanding away, taking away pieces that don't look like Christ. As we see Christ in the scripture and we see the work of God and the ways of God, and we learn those things, we begin to be uncomfortable in the things in our life that aren't like Him. And over time as you read the Word and engage the Word on a daily basis, you are changed. You're altered. You're shaped. My greatest hope as I look around and I hear people's stories - maybe it's a marriage that's in trouble or it's a teenager that's going their own way, or it's a person who is making a bad decision, or maybe it's a person who's never trusted Christ as their Lord and Savior and cares nothing for the church. Here's my one hope for these people and their stories. My one hope is that they'll be exposed to the Word of God. They don't need my stories. They don't need my humor. They don't

need my illustrations. What they need is to be exposed to the Word of God - the living and active, sharp Word of God that reproves and rebukes and trains and teaches and transforms us.

How will you engage the Word of God? Maybe today would be the start of a commitment that would carry you through the rest of your life. I was amazed this week when I came across the story of Lieutenant General William K. Harrison. It was a story from many years ago that I saw in Kent Hughes' book *Disciplines of a Godly Man*. He tells this story about Lieutenant General William K. Harrison. He was a part of the 30th infantry division in World War II. He was the most decorated soldier in the 30th Infantry Division. General Eisenhower declared that infantry division as the number one infantry division, all of World War II. Let me just share this story.

He was the first American to enter Belgium, which he did at the head of the allied forces. He received every decoration for valor except the Congressional Medal of Honor. He was honored with the distinguished Silver Cross. He was honored with a Silver Star, the Bronze Star for valor and the Purple Heart. He was one of the few generals to be wounded in action. When the Korean War began, he served as Chief of Staff in the United Nations Command and because of his character and self control was ultimately President Eisenhower's choice to head the long and tedious negotiations to end the war. General Harrison was a soldier's soldier who led a busy ultra-kinetic life.

He was an amazing man also of the word of God. When he was a 20 year old West Point Cadet, he began reading the Old Testament through once a year and the New Testament four times each year. General Harrison did this until the end of his life. Even in the thick of war, he maintained his commitment by catching up during the two and three day respites for replacement and refitting which followed battles, so that when the war ended he was right on schedule. At the age of 90, his failing eyesight no longer permitted his discipline, but he had read the Old Testament 70 times and the New Testament 280 times. No wonder his godliness and wisdom were proverbial and that the Lord used him for 18 fruitful years to lead the Officers Christian Fellowship.

General Harrison's story tells us two things. First, it is impossible even for the busiest of us not to systematically feed on God's word. Second, his life remains a demonstration of a mind programmed with God's word. His closest associates said that every area of his life - domestic, spiritual, professional - each of the great problems he faced was informed by the scriptures. People marveled at his knowledge of the Bible and the ability to bring it slight to every area of life.

Maybe today as a 20 year old or a 16 year old, you might make some commitment about reading God's Word that would carry you all the way through to age 90 or a hundred or older than that. Maybe at age 80 it'd be a fresh engagement of God's Word today.

Yesterday morning, I had the opportunity to sit for about 60 minutes with the pastor that has had the greatest influence on my life. His name is Al Jackson, and he pastors at Lakeview Baptist

in Auburn, Alabama. I got in touch with him on my way into town to visit family on Friday. On Thursday, I set a time, asking if we could meet for breakfast. Al is in his seventies now. He's been the pastor at Lakeview Baptist for 40 years this coming May.

I asked him about going to breakfast and he said, "Come to my house for breakfast." So I went to his house and walked in and he said, "Carlos, come have a seat." I walked over to the table, and sitting on the table were two cereal bowls and a box of homemade granola with a bowl of fruit. There was half a gallon of almond milk and half a gallon of whole milk sitting in front of my bowl. You see, Al has cancer.

I said, "How are you doing?" He said, "I've altered my diet. I'm fighting it with my diet. Have you've seen this book? Do you know Peter Doyle?" He referred to another pastor and went and got a book that some of you have probably heard of. It's called *How Not to Die*, and it goes through diets that can help you fight cancer.

He said, "Every morning for breakfast, I just eat granola now. My counts are down. Praise the Lord." We talked about it some more and discussed what he was doing and why he was changing his diet and he said, "I just can't feed the cancer." Here's what he was saying. He was saying, "I've altered my diet in order to fight. Instead of feeding what's attacking me, I've altered my diet in order to fight what's attacking me."

I listened to that and I thought, "Oh, the spiritual parallels." If you and I would be willing to alter our spiritual diets. If we would be willing for our souls' intake to change so that we could fight what attacks us instead of feeding what attacks us. There is an enemy. There is an enemy that is like a cancer to everyone of us spiritually. And if we feed it the things of the world and we feed it the things that it thrives on, the enemy will win.

What I'm asking you to do in this new year is to alter your intake. It may mean that you have a different sleep pattern. It may mean that you have to have a different social media interaction. It may mean that the things you watch on television change or the movies you see change. It may be the year that you don't watch that series. Why? Because you've got to make it a priority to feed your soul the Word of God first and foremost. Al said, "40 years in May, Carlos." He said, "You know what is the most amazing thing of 40 years?"

I said, "What is it?"

He said, "You don't see it right up front, but after 40 years of verse by verse, line upon line, precept upon precept of teaching God's word, you look out over a church family and you see people transformed into Christlikeness." And he just started weeping.

What do you want to be in 2019 - more like Christ or more like the world? The opportunity is there to engage the Word of God. I asked our pastors on staff to share with me their plan for engaging the Word of God in 2019. I wanted our church to know what their pastors are doing when

it comes to the Word of God. I received replies back them and I want to share with you what your pastors are doing. I want you to hear examples. The first one to reply says, "Mine is always pretty easy. Since I started reading the Bible through each year, about seven years ago, I can't go away from it. Best spiritual practice I've ever found. I just switched what plan I use each year."

The next guy said, "I'm planning to read through the Bible, but in a slower pace than one year. In about three years, I plan to read through the whole Bible and do this by reading an entire book in one sitting and do this for a month. For example, I'll read the book of Ephesians every day for a month and then move on to the next book. Ephesians takes about 20 minutes to read in one sitting. For larger books that may take two or three months to do this by splitting up the larger book into two or three parts. This approach takes longer, but after reading through Ephesians every day for a month, you really get to know the book. I got this idea from John MacArthur."

Another one said, "I plan to follow along with what our students are doing in their daily reading and then one Old Testament book a semester beginning with Judges."

Another guy said, "I'm going to read and study the Gospels over and over. I've read the Bible in a year for three of the last five years and I've loved that, but I'm going to focus on the Gospels this year. I'm hoping to read through them four or five times."

Another guy on staff listed out every month of the year, and he has assigned to that month a particular book of the Bible that he will read through. So 12 books over the course of 12 months. Another guy responded, "I plan on spending my year reading in the Bible in the Old Testament."

How will you engage the Word this year? Personally, I would ask you to do what I do as far as deciding - just ask the Holy Spirit. You know Christ as your Lord and Savior, and the Holy Spirit lives within you. Right now, sitting in this room before we leave today say, "Holy Spirit, how should I engage the Word of God this year?" Take that challenge, pray and ask the Lord. Just ask that right now and just listen. What's the Holy Spirit impress you with?

I asked the Holy Spirit that about 10 days ago, and He impressed upon my heart to read the Bible chronologically in 2019. I've never done that before. It starts in Genesis. What that means is that when you get over to 1st Kings or 1st or 2nd Samuel, if there was a psalm that David wrote while this event was going on that's recorded there, then the daily reading would include that psalm that was written during that time. So you are reading chronologically through the word of God as it happened. I'm excited about it! I've never done that before and I've already started early. I figure I will probably get behind out there, so I'm going to go into January 1st being a few days ahead already.

My time with the Lord looks something like this. Downstairs in the morning, I fix coffee, sit down in the chair and I'll read a psalm. I have a black and red little journal book. I sit down in that chair that looks out the window in our backyard and I drink coffee and I have a devotional book there. I'll read the dated day in that devotional. And then I'll read scripture and pray as I read for

things that come to my mind as I read. I pray about those things, and in that journal, it may be a one word reply it may be a sentence, it may be a page or a paragraph. I date that page and list the scripture that I'm reading that day and then some kind of reaction to this question: "What do I need to hear, see and do according to the word of God today?"

Now, some of you may use an acrostic like S.O.A.P or H.E.A.R. You may have another plan that works far better, but for me it's just a simple question. "What do I need to hear, see and do according to God's Word today?" See, we don't need to do just Bible study. We need in our life this practice of Bible doing. And we need to come away from reading the Word and not just say, "What do I need to see here, what do I need to hear here?" but also "What do I need to do in response to this?" Sometimes the doing is just praising God. What I need to do when I'm reading that God said, "Let there be light," is praise God today all day long, for He is the creator. Maybe that question will help you in your time.

How will you engage the word of God this year?