

MISSION BELLS: 4. LEARN

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Matthew 11:25-30

I want you to be transformed. That is, in fact, the purpose of this sermon series. That is actually the purpose of every sermon—and that is to hear the Word of God and be transformed.

You are not here in church this morning to be entertained, to be made to feel better. You are not here to earn the points that will get you into heaven. You are here to be transformed, to be changed. You are here to be transformed so that you will then go out into the world and re-align the world with the promise of God found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. You are to be Christ's disciples and God's agents of change. That is why you are here.

We achieve this transformation by prayer, by fellowship, by listening for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But mostly, we achieve this change through the power of God's Word found in Scripture. We take this Scripture to be powerful and holy. It is God's Word.

As we read in the Second Epistle to Timothy, *All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.* Scripture equips the saints for good work.

In this Season of Lent, I am offering you this sermon series called Mission BELLS. The "Mission" part tells us what we are supposed to do. And the BELLS part describes how we can do it. BELLS is an acronym for five Missional Habits: Bless, Eat, Listen, Learn, and Sent.

Already, I have introduced you to Bless and Eat and Listen, urging you to go out into the community in a spirit of evangelism. I asked you to Bless three people and I asked you to Eat with three people. Last week, I asked that you engage in active listening—in other words, pray and listen to God. And I want you to continue doing these things until they become habit or second nature. If we want to transform the world, then we are going to need these Missional Habits in our tool kit.

So the fourth Missional Habit in this series is the second L in BELLS—and that is Learn. Like last week's call to Listen, Learning doesn't demand that we go out and directly engage other people...at least, not yet. Very simply, the Missional Habit of Learning involves learning the Gospels. Michael Frost, the creator of the BELLS system, asks that we simply read the gospels in order that we learn the story of Jesus.

But I can hear you and you are saying that you already know the story of Jesus. Born in Bethlehem, did ministry and miracles, was crucified in Jerusalem and three days later, was resurrected.

Yes, that is the outline of the gospel story, but there is so much more. There are the teachings and the parables, the acts of power, the conflicts with the authorities, the calling of the disciples, and more. As Christians, we need to know the life of Jesus inside and out. And so, Frost says, we must read the gospels accounts, and read them over and over. He says (and I love this word) that we must “marinate” in the gospels. We don’t ignore the rest of scripture, but we focus on the gospels—Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John.

The fourth Missional Habit is to set aside at least one period of time each week and savor the Gospels. 15 or 20 minutes to read and savor. To marinate even.

Frost offers two reasons why he recommends this habit. The first reason is the “devotional value of growing closer to Jesus.” The better we know him, the closer we can get. The second reason is more practical. If we plan to evangelize about Jesus, then we should know what we are talking about. To talk about Jesus you have to know Jesus. It is as simple as that.

The reason we call these habits and not just a one-and-done, is that habits themselves change us—they define us.

There is the old saying that you can’t teach an old dog new tricks. In other words, as we get older, it becomes more difficult to learn new habits. As it turns out, that is simply not true. Research on neural plasticity (which is the ability of our brain cells to change and reorganize) reveals that new behaviors are possible through all stages of life by rewiring the brain. How do we rewire our brains? By habits.

Pathways in the brain are made by connections between neurons. When a behavior is performed, the connections between these cells change with the frequency of the behavior performed. These neural pathways are like grooves in the road maps of our brain. The more frequently we travel the road, the stronger and more second nature the behavior becomes. You can practice traveling down “new roads” or neural pathways by performing a new behavior with frequent repetition, connecting new beliefs to support the new behavior. It also helps to visualize a positive outcome resulting from these new behaviors.¹

Back in the 1940s, Dr. Donald Hebb coined a phrase that sums this up nicely, “Neurons that fire together wire together.”

¹ <https://maximus.com/the-brain-our-habits>

In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul addressed this very fact when he wrote, *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.* Two thousand years ago—Paul got it. “Be transformed by the renewing of your minds.”

In our fourth Missional Habit—Learn—Frost is calling on us to really learn the Gospels by making it a habit to read them. By reading and re-reading the gospels we can purposely rewire our brains, we can internalize the story of Jesus, we can start to actually live the gospel. Living the gospel is the greatest form of evangelism imaginable.

This won't happen overnight. It will take months, if not years of reading and reflection. But through this habit, you become so attuned to the words of Christ that you quit asking “What would Jesus do?” and simply do it. Through your actions, you become Christ-like. What better proclamation of the Gospel is there than that? Talk about Questionable Living!?

So, why does Michael Frost want us to re-read the gospels? Isn't once enough? No. Encountering the scripture changes us. It is the Word of God. They say that lightning never strikes the same place twice. That is actually not true, but the old joke says that once lightning has hit a place, it's not the same.

The same goes for the Gospels. As we engage with them, they change us. Furthermore, every time we read a Gospel, we bring new life experience to the task. For example, when I was young and read Jesus' command, *Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone,* I thought I understood it. But now through the eyes of years of life experience, I read this passage differently. My perspective has changed. I'm not the same person I was in my twenties. Engaging the Gospels changes us.

For a concise statement on the purpose of scriptures, we need only look at the Shorter Catechism. Its third question asks this: “What do the Scriptures principally teach?” And the answer is: “The Scriptures principally teach, what [people are] to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of [people].”

In our reading for today from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus criticizes the religious leaders—specifically the Pharisees—for their so-called wisdom and intelligence. With all their knowledge, they could not see Jesus as anything more than a teacher. They feared him because he threatened their power. They could not see God in him. They used scripture and Jewish teachings to impose burdens on the people. They made it difficult for the people to have confidence in their relationship with God.

And so, Jesus offers an invitation to the people when he says, *Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens. I will give you rest.* These burdens

are the demands of the religious leaders on the people—demands that don't actually bring them closer to God. Jesus is telling the people that there is a way to God through him.

It is as if the way to God were a train. The Pharisees tell the people that if they want to get to God, then they have to actually get behind the train and push it. They can get to God if they do the work.

Jesus, on the other hand, is telling them that he will drive the train. All they have to do is to get on board—follow him. They can sit in the carriage and ride. The way of Jesus gives the people rest from the way of the Pharisees.

Jesus offers a second invitation when he says, *Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me.* We all have a lot of notions about who Jesus is and what he wants based on what people have told us. But when we study the scripture ourselves, that is when we learn from Jesus.

And what do we call those who learn from Jesus? Disciples. The word disciple is from the Latin word for learner. But being a disciple is more than being a student. It means to associate with someone who is a teacher or a master. Being a disciple is an ongoing act of not just learning but imitating the teacher's way of life.

As followers of Christ, as those who have boarded that train, we are called to be disciples/learners. We are to know the master, learn from the master, and imitate the master.

When we do this, we will be transformed. We will transform the world.

Amen.