

Bradford Houdyshel

Title: Let the Word of Christ Richly Dwell Within You

Key verses:

Colossians 3:16 (NASB) “ –Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”

Romans 12:2 (NASB) “ –And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Good morning, everyone. It's good to see you all here today. Last month, I presented two sermons here on the theme of living by the Holy Spirit. And one of the things I mentioned more than once was the importance of reading and studying the words of Scripture, here in the Bible. Knowing Scripture is very useful — essential — in helping us live God-honoring lives, conforming our thoughts and our behavior according to Christian principles. Three years ago, I did a sermon on the importance of reading the Scripture and internalizing its teachings. Today, I would like to share that message with you again.

I have taken the title of my message today from the opening phrase of Colossians 3:16 (NASB) “ –Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you...”

“Let the word of Christ ... richly dwell ... within you.”

What is this “word of Christ” and how are we to let it “richly dwell within you ... within us ... within me”? This is what I want to speak on today.

And I have a second verse to share with you. Let's look at the first half of Romans 12:2 (NASB) – “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind ...”

Do not be conformed to this world...
but be transformed ...
by the renewing of your mind ...

The “word of Christ” I mentioned a moment ago refers to the words about Christ, the words Christ spoke to his followers, the words the apostles preached in the early years, the words recorded here in this book (the New Testament). Since Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, and since He is the Son of God, perhaps we can expand this thought and have it be an admonition to us to let the Bible – God's message of salvation to us – to let the Bible's words richly dwell within us.

And this is a crucial element in putting into practice the admonition in Romans 12:2 to “... be transformed by the renewing of your mind ...”. A prime way to *renew our minds* is to let the words of the Bible, especially the gospels and epistles, richly dwell within us.
Dwell – let the words make their home in our hearts ... let the words be welcomed in our hearts.

Read the words of Scripture, ponder the words, meditate on them, incorporate them into your thinking ... and, crucially, *put them into practice*. This is the way I have lived my life, and today this is what I want to encourage you to do. I want to encourage you to get to know the Bible, and I will share with you some techniques that may be helpful for you to do this. Again in today's message you will hear quite a bit of my own personal testimony.

Let me quote the whole of Colossians 3:16 (NASB) “ –Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual

songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”

We are to let the Christian scriptures fully and completely dwell within us ... and to do so with wisdom. And we are to teach and admonish each other – that is, as each of us learn more of the scriptures and how to put them into practice, we are to share that knowledge with each other, and sometimes also admonish a Christian brother or sister who is going astray.

One of the ways we might do this is through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Throughout Christian history, songs and hymns have been ways to remind the Christian congregation of the great truths of the Christian message.

There is another passage of scripture which mentions *psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs*. Let's look at Ephesians 5:17-19 (NASB). It says, “So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. ¹⁸ And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ speaking to one another in *psalms and hymns and spiritual songs*, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord.”

In Colossians 3:16, just before *psalms and hymns and spiritual songs*, we have the admonition to let the word of Christ dwell within us richly. Now, here in Ephesians 5, what we have just before *psalms and hymns and spiritual songs* is the admonition to be filled with the Holy Spirit. *Filled with the Holy Spirit*.

These are equally important points. To have the words of the Bible completely fill us, living within us. And to have the Holy Spirit completely fill us, living within us.

I am often moved by what I read in John chapter 15 (NASB), where Jesus compares Himself to a vine ... and He calls His disciples branches of that vine. In verse 1 He says, “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser.”

Verses 4 and 5 say, “Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you, unless you abide in Me. ⁵ I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing.”

Wow. Abide in Christ. This word *abide* means “to dwell in / to make your residence in.” We *dwell in* Christ ... *we make our residence in* Him. Verse 4 begins, “Abide in Me ... and I in you.” Not only are we to make *our residence in Him*, continuing a relationship with Him and His church, but He makes *His residence in us*, He lives *in us*. Not only is it the word of Christ which is to dwell in us, but Christ Himself is to dwell in us.

My ESV Study Bible makes this comment: “*Abide in me* means to continue in a daily, personal relationship with Jesus, characterized by trust, prayer, obedience, and joy.” So, what we have here is an admonition: to continue ... in a daily ... personal ... relationship with Jesus. Characterized by *trust, prayer, obedience, and joy*.

We make our residence in Him. He makes His residence in us. And my main verse today says His words are to richly make their residence in our hearts and minds.

When we are branches of the vine which is Jesus, we gain our nourishment from Him; we gain our very life from Him. John 15:8 says, “By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.”

When we abide in Christ and gain our nourishment from Him, we are fruitful. Very fruitful. And it is this that proves that we are His disciples, that we are learners and followers of Him and His teaching.

Verses 10 and 11 finish the paragraph: “If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father’s commandments, and abide in His love. ¹¹ These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.”

Joy. His joy is *in us*. And our joy is made full ... complete. This is my testimony – I have learned that if we walk by His ways faithfully, we bear fruit and we have satisfaction – we have joy – because we have followed His will when we follow His words.

I want to spend most of today’s message sharing with you some techniques of how to incorporate the words of the Bible into our hearts and minds. And follow the words – put them into practice.

Technique #1: Regular, frequent Bible reading. The Bible says we have to have the essential truths about Christ fully incorporated into our hearts and minds, richly dwelling in us. To do that, regular, frequent incorporation of God’s Word into our hearts is a must. You can do that by reading, but also in other ways, such as listening to instruction at church, at school, and in the home. Today we have the great privilege of living in a literate society with Bibles freely available, so we certainly are able to have our own Bible and read it whenever we want.

It has been said that the Bible is “God’s love letter to us.” That’s a nice way to put it. Contained here are the essential things God wants us to know about Himself and His Son and how we are to live our lives (after all, He is the one who gave us our life). So, we ought to spend time to get to know this Book, know its contents, and live by the Christian principles outlined here.

It would be great if you could read through the whole Bible at least once. It would be really great if you could read it through several times. And because the New Testament contains the Christian message, you should read through the New Testament many times ... and often.

There are various Bible-reading plans available that will guide you through reading the whole Bible in one year or two years ... or the Old Testament once through and the New Testament twice through in one calendar year. Some plans have you read several chapters a day straight through from Genesis to Revelation, while some plans have you reading a little bit of Old Testament, a little bit of New Testament, and a little bit of Psalms and Proverbs each day of the year. You can choose the plan that best suits you.

Many people will read one Psalm or one Proverb each day in addition to whatever other book of the Bible they are reading that day. I have sometimes used that method when reading the Bible through in a year. One way to read through Proverbs is to read one chapter a day through one month - there are 31 chapters in Proverbs and there are 31 days in most months, so you can read Proverbs chapter 1 on the first day of the month, chapter 2 on the second day, and so on. I have done that many times.

There is one more thing I want to say before moving on to the next point. I learned early in my Christian life that when we sit down to read our Bible, we should always begin with a prayer – a prayer that God would open my mind and heart to what His Word says, and what He might be wanting me to learn today. Each time I approach this Book, I need to do so with humility, with openness, and with a request that the Holy Spirit enlighten me with the words I read today.

Bible-reading Technique #2. I would like to share with you a unique Bible-reading technique that I learned from John MacArthur. For the past few minutes, I have told you how great it is to read through the whole Bible – that gives you a wonderful overview of the whole message of the Scriptures. But I would like to share a technique with you that has been extremely valuable to me. I don’t know the name of this technique, but it involves reading the same block of Scripture every day for one month.

Perhaps three or four or five or six chapters. The same chapters every day for one month. When John MacArthur described this on one of his tapes, he told us he started out by reading the First Epistle of John every day for 30 days. It's five chapters long, and takes about 20 minutes to read. That's a good amount of material for this exercise. You can do any of the shorter epistles like this, like Ephesians or Philippians. For a longer epistle, such as Romans or Hebrews, you can divide it into three sections, reading the first section every day for a month, then second section, then the third section, completing the book in three months.

With this method, you can really get to know each of these books ... you get to know the outline, the primary topics being presented, and so on. I found that if I didn't understand a particular verse or a particular paragraph the first few times I read it, after repeated readings it would become clearer to me. Oftentimes, I discovered that the answer to the puzzling verse is in a nearby verse on the next page or the previous page. I start seeing the connections between different parts of that epistle. You wouldn't enjoy the benefit of discovering these connections if you read each book of the Bible only once in a while. But by encountering these passages every day for one month, you really get a grasp for the book's outline, the main points, and eventually you can gain some clarification on verses that were initially rather puzzling to you.

Well, there is more I could say on the benefits of this continuous reading method, but I don't want to spend too much time on this topic. Try the method and see how you like it.

I have shared with you two techniques / two programs of how to incorporate Scripture into your mind and heart. In a moment, I will share some more techniques with you, but first I want to take a little detour. I want to give you: A word of admonition, a word of caution.

We don't read scripture or study scripture just to have head-knowledge of what it says. You have to put it into practice. That is the whole point of incorporating scripture into your heart and soul. Following the admonition in Colossians 3:16 to "*let the word of Christ richly dwell within you*" means you not only read it and study it, you also *let it change you*. "Dwelling richly within you" means you let its commandments and admonitions change your behavior, to be more conformed to Christ ... to be a transformed person.

One of my favorite verses is 1st Timothy 1:5 (NASB) "–But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." The goal of Christian instruction is not knowledge of the words on the page. The goal of Christian instruction is not filling your head with Bible knowledge. The goal is to be a transformed person. Love from a pure heart. A good conscience. A sincere faith.

Another favorite verse comes from my favorite New Testament book: James. This book has a lot of very practical things to say about living out our Christian lives. James 1:22-25 says this "–But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. ²³For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; ²⁴for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. ²⁵But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man shall be blessed in what he does."

We must not be a person who merely reads the word or hears it preached. We must be a doer of the word – we must act on it. We must "look intently at the perfect law" and then follow it. Such a person shall be blessed.

"Look *intently* at the perfect law." Well, this thought leads me into Technique #3 for incorporating God's word into your heart and mind: Meditation on Scripture. More than just reading the Bible, even

reading it over and over again, another good thing to do is to slow down and meditate on certain portions of scripture. The best method of meditation for me is this: as I read through Scripture, if a particular verse or paragraph strikes me, I will sit and reread it and ponder how to enact it in my life. I sit with the open Bible in my lap and my eyes open, pondering the passage. Sometimes the verse tells me that I need to change something in my life. Sometimes, the verse is describing something glorious about our future lives in heaven with Christ. Or, I come across some fascinating aspect of Christian theology that I hadn't noticed before. What I do in times like this is to sit and ponder and reread the verse and visualize how I should change my behavior or how the theological truth being described gives me a present hope for our future life with Christ. This is how I like to meditate on scripture.

Technique #4: Inductive Bible Study. I was taught this method back in my college days, but we didn't use this name for it – we were just taught that this was the way we should approach our Bible reading in order to really grasp the message of a particular passage of scripture and what it means for our life. The length of the passage may differ: perhaps it's one paragraph long, or a whole chapter, or maybe even just one or two verses. Inductive Bible study is a three-step process: Observation, Interpretation, and Application.

Observation. First, observe the basics of what the Bible passage is saying. This answers the question: What does the passage say? It might be nice to have a notebook and record your observations. Be patient and dig thoroughly into what the passage is saying.

Interpretation. This answers the question: What does the passage mean? Careful observation gradually leads you into interpreting what the passage means, what it is trying to teach. Don't run to a commentary book or a Study Bible too quickly. I vividly remember hearing that advice from John MacArthur: don't consult a commentary book too quickly – instead, struggle with the passage yourself first. Later, if you wish to confirm some of your thoughts, check out what the commentaries say.

Application. This answers the question: How does the meaning of this passage apply to me? The Bible contains many different types of literature, and the New Testament will often be more relevant to us than some passages in the Old Testament. But there is usually something useful to be gleaned from any chapter of the Bible. Let me quote 2nd Timothy 3:16-17 “–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.”

Technique #5: Scripture memorization. You may remember that Pastor Alistair talked about this many times. I think this is absolutely wonderful. When you put the effort in to memorize certain key verses and then recall them back to your mind every once in a while to ponder them again and let their truths soak into your heart, this is really putting into practice the principle of *letting the word of Christ richly dwell within you* and letting yourself *be transformed* in your thinking. And the younger you are when you start this the better. When I was real little, I learned several verses by heart:

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world ...”

1st John 1:9 about confessing our sins.

1st John 4:19 (KJV) “We love him, because he first loved us.”

When I was in college, I joined the Christian fraternity there. The fraternity gave us a set of verses to memorize as part of the membership process. I still remember and treasure some of these verses. Joshua 1:8 (NASB) “–This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success.” Hebrews 10:24-25 “–And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another;

and all the more as you see the day drawing near.”

And the theme verse of my Christian fraternity Alpha Gamma Omega:

2nd Timothy 2:15 “ –Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth.”

Handling accurately the word of truth. Be diligent. A workman not ashamed.

Approved to God. Handling accurately the word of truth. *Such important admonitions.*

Also while in college, I was introduced to the Topical Memory System, the set of 60 verses which Pastor Alistair told you about and encouraged you to do. Well, way back in college, I bought the box of scripture memory cards. I memorized about ten of the verses. Some of them were the verses I just quoted a moment ago. And there were some others:

Galatians 2:20 “ –I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me.”

And this crucial pair of verses:

Psalm 119:9&11 “ –How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping it according to Your word.... Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against You.”

Boy, this pair of verses has been vitally important to me. There are a lot of temptations that come to young men ... I’m sure you know what I mean. These verses kept me out of trouble in my younger days, and they are so ingrained in me that they’ve kept me out of trouble all the years since.

Well, I didn’t finish the 60-verse program back in my college days, but when Alistair McKenna became pastor of our church, he challenged us to do this scripture memorization program. So, I got on the ball and did it. It was a wonderful experience, and not as hard as you might think. You can accomplish any big task if you do it one step at a time. I love the way these 60 verses are divided into five sets of 12 verses, and then each set of twelve is further divided into six pairs of verses, each pair linked by a particular theme. Like this:

LIVING THE NEW LIFE	PROCLAIMING CHRIST	RELIANCE ON GOD'S RESOURCES	BEING CHRIST'S DISCIPLE	GROWTH IN CHRISTLIKENESS
Christ the Center 2 Cor. 5:17 Gal. 2:20	All Have Sinned Rom. 3:23 Isaiah 53:6	His Spirit 1 Cor. 3:16 1 Cor. 2:12	Put Christ First Mt. 6:33 Luke 9:23	Love John 13:34-35 1 John 3:18
Obedience to Christ Rom. 12:1 John 14:21	Sin's Penalty Rom. 6:23 Heb. 9:27	His Strength Isaiah 41:10 Phil 4:13	Separate From the World 1 John 2:15-16 Rom. 12:2	Humility Phil 2:3-4 1 Pet. 5:5-6
The Word 2 Tim. 3:16 Joshua 1:8	Christ Paid the Penalty Rom. 5:8 1 Pet. 3:18	His Faithfulness Lam. 3:22-23 Numbers 23:19	Be Steadfast 1 Cor. 15:58 Heb.12:3	Purity Eph. 5:3 1 Pet. 2:11
Prayer John 15:7 Phil. 4:6,7	Salvation is not by Works Eph. 2:8-9 Titus 3:5	His Peace Isaiah 26:3 1 Pet. 5:7	Serve Others Mark 10:45 2 Cor. 4:5	Honesty Leviticus 19:11 Acts 24:16
Fellowship Mt. 18:20 Heb. 10:24-25	Must Receive Christ John 1:12 Rev. 3:20	His Provision Rom. 8:32 Phil. 4:19	Give Generously Proverbs 3:9-10 2 Cor. 9:6-7	Faith Heb. 11:6 Rom. 4:20-21
Witnessing Mt. 4:19 Rom. 1:16	Assurance of Salvation 1 John 5:13 John 5:24	His Help in Temptation Heb. 2:18 Psalms 119:9,11	Develop World Vision Acts 1:8 Mt. 28:19-20	Good Works Gal. 6:9-10 Mt. 5:16

What I did was take one set of 12 verses and I first memorized the outline: the overall topic of the set, then the six themes. Then I memorized each pair of verses. I kept the scripture memory cards in my shirt pocket – the set of 12 cards, or maybe just one pair of cards – and while walking to the train station in the morning, I would often pull out one or two cards and work on memorizing them. There are a lot of minutes in the day you can make use of to do this scripture memorization program. I encourage

you to do it. With some discipline and determination, it is not hard to complete this program. If you would like to obtain a set of cards, please ask me and I can get you some cards.

Well, there is more I could say, but I need to move on.

Technique #6: Listen to Christian sermons and lectures. The more you listen, the more you can incorporate God's word into your heart and mind. There was an event in the life of my twin brother and me which was incredibly meaningful – I dare say it was life-changing. When my brother and I went off to college at UCLA, we were introduced to John MacArthur's church. And somebody gave my brother a big box of John MacArthur tapes: there must have been more than a hundred tapes in there. During the summer after our first year of university (that was 1978), we were back home in San Diego and our father gave us a job for the summer. We painted our entire family house. And we got out a tape recorder and a very long extension cord and listened to those more than a hundred tapes – some of them we listened to twice (or even three times). That summer might be called one of the great foundations of my Christian life. We got quite a theological education with those tapes. Two summers later I had exhausted all the tapes and I began listening to Christian radio – many fine preachers. This started a lifetime of listening to Christian messages whenever possible, especially during household chores (or listening with an iPod while I'm taking a walk). This habit continues up to the present day.

Not only *reading the Scripture*, feeding your soul through your eyes.
But also *listening to messages*, feeding your soul through your ears.

Technique #7 (this is the last one I will share with you today): Biblical input more than one time throughout the day. In my 20's, I had a habit of reading one Psalm soon after waking up in the morning and reading one more Psalm just before bedtime, with a short prayer. And at some point during the day, I also did my regular Bible reading for half an hour or so, and my regular prayer time. Thus, more than once through the day, I had some Biblical and spiritual input. With so much stuff happening to us throughout the day, our minds could drift far from the things of the Lord. I want to get back to thinking of Him, and so I reach for some Biblical input more than once in a day. In recent years, I have generally had my Bible reading time on the train going to or from work, and then at lunchtime or in the evening, I read a short devotional. There are many devotionals available these days – some are in printed form, some are on the internet, and some you can subscribe to and receive by email. I have made use of all of these.

Well, I am approaching the end of today's sermon. The theme of my message today is to *let the word of Christ richly dwell within you*, and to *let it transform you and renew you*. I have shared with you some techniques for incorporating scripture into your mind and heart. And I have advised you to be sure to put into practice what you read in the scripture. We don't read just for head knowledge.

Do you remember the verses from James that I quoted earlier? James 1:22 says, "But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves." Verse 25 says, "But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man shall be blessed in what he does."

I have sought to be a doer of the word. I have sought to be transformed by the Word. I have looked intently at the perfect law and have sought to abide by it. I am not perfect – none of us are. But if you want to know the secret of my spiritual life, it is this:

* Regular, frequent intake of Biblical material, followed by...

* Taking seriously my Christian fraternity's theme verse 2nd Timothy 2:15 "–Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth."

* And taking seriously those verses from James that I read a moment ago.

Let me close today's sermon with the last verse from the Apostle Peter's second epistle, about the importance to keep on growing in our spiritual lives.

2nd Peter 3:18 (NASB) “ –But grow ... *grow* in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory, both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.”