



Read Widely, Read Wisely

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In the Spring of 1990, I was 18 and had fulfilled my life's ambition of graduating from High School. There was a lot about school that was detestable, but I never thought once about quitting. What I hated most about school was not authority, peers, cliques, or the selection of low budget, barely edible, airline rejects that passed as cafeteria "food."

I hated reading. I detested it. I hated books. I hated carrying books to and from school. I resented them for taking up space in my locker. For 12 years I was expected to read, and if that weren't enough, to learn from what I was reading.

The problem was not that I was a slow reader. I was above average. The problem is that I had a hard time focusing on reading and remembering what I read. The minute my eyes hit printed words, my mind hit the playground. My eyes were on the page, but my mind was on my bike.

I looked forward to the day when I was no longer required to read. I would be FREE from the world books! Never to read again! Ahhhhhhhh.

Fast forward to the Fall of 1990. I was standing in line at the Administration Building at Millar College of the Bible. I arrived at the Registrar's table and was assigned my dorm room and handed my class schedule. That wasn't all. The Registrar's assistant handed me a sheet of paper saying, "Here's your booklist for the year."

"Booklist?" I said with great fear and trepidation.

"Would you like to have a seat? Are you going to be OK? Why has all the color drained from your face?" she asked.

The walk across the parking lot to the bookstore took about 52 days. At least that is what it felt like. During that long and difficult journey to the bookstore, I pondered the really tough questions of life: What do I need books for? I came to Bible College to study the Bible and I **have** one of those. What kinds of books am I going to have to read? Do Christians write books?

Surely this was a trap! A cruel joke! A vicious hoax! Could it be that my freedom from books was evaporating before my eyes? Would they really inflict this upon me?

My arrival in the Campus Bookstore cured me of my hatred for reading! I found at College, a treasure trove of books that fed a hunger that, until that time, I never knew existed.

That most certainly was not the end of my struggle with reading. I had for many years established bad habits and poor discipline that I had to overcome. Since High School, I have looked for ways to make reading easier and more rewarding. I have found some tricks and established a few habits that have improved my reading.

Some of you don't need to read this at all. I know there are some of you out there who can read a book faster than I can eat a meal, and that is fast! Some of you read more books in a month than I do in a year. I also know that there are some who wish they were more disciplined in their reading. There are some who wish they were able to acquire a passion for knowledge and books. One thing that has helped me is constantly evaluating my reading habits and seeking to improve in that area of my life.

Charlie Jones says that “Readers are leaders and leaders are readers.” He is right. If you look at list of people who shaped history, influenced their culture and left a mark on the world, they are without exception, readers. Now, not all readers are leaders, but almost all leaders are readers.

So if you want to develop a good reading habit, I offer to you some disciplines that I have found extremely helpful.

1. Read the Bible once a year. You have to start there. I have written on this before so I won’t rehash old territory. I will only say that I don’t care how much you read, what you read or how often you read, if you neglect the Word of God in your reading, your reading is deficient.

Reading through the Bible in a year is not a lofty goal. Think of it this way; there are 1189 chapters in the Bible. If you read 5 chapters a day, you will finish the Bible in 238 days. That is far short of a year! That means if you begin on January 1 and don’t miss a single day, reading only 5 chapters a day, you’ll finish by August 26th!

I try to average 5 chapters a day. Some days I do more and some days I do less. I skip my reading on Sunday mornings since I am focused on whatever text I am preaching. Friday mornings are hit and miss. Even missing 2 days a week, I usually finish by the end of November.

You may be looking at that big thick Bible sitting on the table and thinking, “I could never get through that big book in a year!” Then get a small print version so you don’t have so many pages to read.

There is no other reading discipline that I have ever adopted that has proved as profitable as this one.

2. Plan your reading! *If you don’t control your reading, your reading will control you.* Apart from reading the Bible every year, the single greatest thing I have ever done to improve my reading habits is to *plan my reading.*

Here is how it works. The first week of January every year, I sit down and I select a group of books that I will read that year. I select books from 8 categories: theology, preaching, counseling, leadership, apologetics, church history, devotional, and biography. Then I pull those books off my shelf and put them on a

special shelf in my office called my “reading shelf.” I make a list of those books on a piece of paper and I hang it on the wall next to the “reading shelf.” That serves as a constant reminder of what my goal is for the year.

When I begin a book, I write the date that I started inside the front cover. When I finish, I write the date inside the back cover. That allows me to track how long it took to read the book. It also allows me years later to quickly tell how long it has been since I read that particular book. I also write the finish date next to the title on my list as I mark it off.

This discipline of planning my reading yields several benefits. *First, it helps me avoid “ruts” in my reading.* Before I started this, I found that I always read the same 3 or 4 authors, and I tended to read in very narrow fields (apologetics/devotional). I was reading a lot, but not widely. Planning my reading helped reveal that I had “reading hobby horses” that I seldom strayed from and it forced me to broaden my reading beyond my comfort zones.

Second, it motivated me to read more. I have goals to reach and I am motivated to get ,my reading shelf cleared before December 31.

Set your goals realistically! Don’t set yourself up for failure by setting aside 50 books if you can only realistically read 20 in the year. But don’t set your goals too low either. I usually plan 20+ books a year this way.

Third, it helps me guide my intellectual growth. At the beginning of each year I ask myself, “What topic or subject do I want to become intimately familiar with this year?” Then I select 3 - 6 of the best books on that subject that I can find. I put them on list and I make sure that I get them read. One year I focused on the doctrine of creation. Another year I zeroed in on the Sovereignty of God. Other years I have concentrated my reading on preaching, counseling, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Systematic Theology, Hermeneutics and Church History. This year I purposed to read heavily in eschatology and just last week, I finished the last of four books that I set aside in January.

Find a topic you are deficient in and plan the reading list with the goal of filling in that gap. Every year I gain thorough knowledge on one additional subject. As someone once said, “*One only reads well when one*

reads with some quite personal goal in mind."

Fourth, it frees me from the "tyranny of the urgent." Have you ever had someone walk up to you, shove a book in your hand and say something like, "You have to read to this book! I want to know what you think!" This happens to me all the time. Don't get me wrong, I don't mind it one bit. It helps me to keep my finger on the pulse of our congregation in knowing what everyone is reading and what types of books are making an impact in people's lives. I love talking about books with people. But if I read everything that other people wanted me to read, I would only read what other people wanted me to read. I wouldn't have time for anything else. I can't afford to do that, and neither can you.

When someone says that to me, I quite honestly reply by saying, "Thanks for the suggestion, but I have to be honest, the earliest I can get to that book would be sometime next year." People then look at me like I just told them I had been abducted by aliens. I then go on to explain that I have already established the list of books that I will read this year, but if they want, I can put it into consideration to get on next year's list.

Sometimes I find it necessary to make an exception, but I certainly don't feel pressured. The reading shelf takes priority.

Fifth, I have appropriate wiggle room. When I sat down the first of January to make this year's list, I didn't plan for the release of *The Da Vinci Code* Movie. So I had to add to my list two books on *The Da Vinci Code*. Occasionally something like that comes up and I insert a book into the schedule.

Occasionally, I will read an entire book just in preparation for a single message. For instance, in preparation to preach on Peter's command to "repent" in **Acts 2:38** I read the old puritan classic *The Doctrine of Repentance* by Thomas Watson. **Acts 2:38** was the first mention of repentance in the book of Acts and I wanted to have a good understanding of the subject so I could give it a thorough treatment. I couldn't have foreseen the need to read that book so I had to add it to my list.

Plan your reading! It makes you think through what you are going to read and why. It exposes your weak spots and your needs. It will do more for making you a well read individual than any other discipline. You plan

your vacations, you plan your finances, you plan your meals, you plan your shopping. Why wouldn't you plan your reading?

3. Reward your reading. If you accomplish the goal of reading all the books on your list, treat yourself to something really special.

I also set smaller goals throughout the year and reward myself if I achieve them. As I mentioned, I just finished the last of four theology books on eschatology. When I started the first book, I determined that I would plow through all four and finish them without starting any other books in the meantime (a violation of number four below). I wanted to focus on the subject and get them out of the way early in the year. Those four books were over 1600 pages of text. So I decided that after I finished them I would reward myself for my discipline. So instead of beginning another book on my reading list, I decided to read one of my books about Ronald Reagan. For me, any reading about Ronald Reagan is a treat. So a few days ago I started reading *Ronald Reagan in Private: A Memoir of My Years in the White House* by Jim Kuhn (Executive Assistant to the President). You may want to reward yourself with a bowl of ice cream. For me, reading about my favorite President is ice cream for the brain; my reward for sticking to it and accomplishing a good portion of this year's list.

4. Read more than one book at a time. Initially this is going to strike you as counter intuitive, but hear me out. When someone finds out that I am currently reading 3-5 different books at the same time as well as periodicals and journals they will respond with something like, "How do you keep it all straight and avoid getting it all mixed up in your mind?" It is easier than you think.

First, I have found that I may not remember what book I read something in, but I will find it easier to remember where I was when I read it. So I keep books scattered all over my house. I do my heavier reading in my chair, lighter reading in bed before going to sleep.

Second, I don't read multiple books on the same subject at the same time. For instance, right now I am reading a biography on R.C. Chapman, a book on God's providence, and a book on Ronald Reagan. It is not difficult to keep it all straight. I find that my recall is

better when I am reading more than one book than when I am reading only one.

A second benefit of reading more than one book at a time is that it keeps me reading no matter what mood I am in. Sometimes I sit down in my chair after a long day of study and I want to read a little to take my mind off of things. I look over at the book by the chair and realize that I just don't feel in the mood to read that book right now. However, I always have 2 or 3 other options.

If the only book I was reading was the one next to the chair, I would have decided not to read. Instead, I had a selection of other books I was reading, one of which I was in the mood to read, and thus I end up reading instead of doing something unproductive with my time.

5. Always have something to read available.

When you go to the doctor, dentist, or some place where you know you will be waiting, take something along with you to read. Don't trust that you'll get right in, or that there will be something to read waiting for you. If I go to Coeur d'Alene, I take something to read. You never know when you will find yourself waiting in the car while your wife is in JoAnne's Fabrics or your husband is in Black Sheep. Redeem the time! I keep magazines, books, periodicals, journals and other things to read in nearly every corner of my house. There is always something within reach.

Don't watch commercials, keep a book handy and read a couple pages while you are waiting for the football game to come back on. Are you waiting for your water to boil and you have nothing to do? Waiting for food to cook? Pick up your book.

Remember that being a good reader doesn't require that you devote hours a day to extended reading. Sometimes I sit down and all I get read is a chapter, half a chapter or a couple of pages. Sometimes it is just part of an article. But it is something. Take what you can handle. Small bites are better than no bites.

7. Don't finish junk! Oh, how many times I have started into a book only to find that I wasn't learning anything, wasn't interested, and wasn't profiting from it or that the author had a good subject, but poor writing skill.

I used to feel some sort of unexplainable moral

obligation to finish the book. I didn't know why. Finally I realized that if it wasn't accomplishing my goal of teaching me something or edifying me in some way, it was wasting my time. So now I think nothing of putting a useless book back on the shelf unfinished. It makes room on the list for better books. You only have so much time. Don't waste it on junk! The purpose of reading is to get something out of it; information, recreation, refreshment. If it is not doing that - ditch it! It is not a sin to not finish a book. It'll only discourage you from reading if you start to feel that reading is a waste of time.

So What Do I Read?

I already mentioned that I read about 20-30 books a year in 8 different categories. On top of that, I do my best to stay current with several magazines.

In order to stay abreast of world events, cultural events, and politics, I read **World Magazine** for news and culture from a Christian perspective. World is the best newsweekly I have been able to find.

In order to keep current in the area of apologetics, I subscribe to **The Christian Research Journal** (published semi monthly by The Christians Research Institute) and **Creation Magazine** (published quarterly by Answers in Genesis).

I don't read every article in every magazine, but like books, I select articles and magazines that will contribute to my goal of reading widely and reading wisely.

I don't think for a minute that I have learned all there is to being a good reader. I am thankful to the Lord that I no longer react to books like Superman to Kryptonite. I am sure that many reading this right now could offer their own suggestions and I would love to hear them. I have to go. I just spied a book that I think I'll have to add to my list.

Without Wax -



