

CHRISTIAN HEADS, HEARTS, AND HANDS

ARTICLES TO FORM US AS FOLLOWERS OF "THE WAY"

Four Good Reasons to Read Good Books

by Tim Challies

This weekend I spoke to a group of men down here in Nashville, Tennessee. The pastor asked me to speak to the men about reading and, specifically, why Christian men need to be readers. While what I prepared was directed specifically to men, it is applicable to both men and women. Here are four good reasons to read good books: To know, to grow, to lead, and to love.

Read to Know. The best reason to read books is to know God. We believe, of course, that each of us can and will meet God in his Word, but this does not mean that he reveals himself to each of us in equal measure. We can and should benefit from what others have learned and we do that through books. Books are an important part of our lifelong task of coming to know the person and works of God.

There are many people who are intimidated by reading theological works. However, we are well-served with entry-level and mid-range books. It doesn't matter who you are, there is a book written at your level. One of the problems with allowing ourselves to be intimidated away from difficult books, books that are just a bit beyond us, is that we can begin to believe we've got God pretty much figured out. But here's the thing: You may capture and box up the God of Joel Osteen, but then you read John Calvin or Jonathan Edwards and are utterly humbled by just how little you know of this God.

If you do not read, you deny yourself a great way to learn who God is and how he acts in this world. There is no study more satisfying and more enlarging than this.

Read to Grow. Reading is a means through which we initiate and maintain personal growth. We read to know God and we read to grow in our ability to honor him in every area of our lives. There are three kinds of growth I want to point you toward: Growth in areas of weakness, in areas of strength, and in areas of responsibility.

Identify areas of weakness and read books to strengthen yourself there. This may be weakness of knowledge, weakness of character, or weakness of understanding. If you have too low a view of God, read *The Holiness of God* by R.C. Sproul. If you are struggling with parenting, read *Gospel-Powered Parenting* by William Farley. If you struggle with making decisions, read *Decisions, Decisions* by Dave Swavely. If you don't know where you are weak, read a book on humility. Whatever your weakness, there is almost definitely a book that answers it specifically and well.

Identify areas of strength and read to grow all the more. Here is where you push yourself to grow beyond the basic principles and move to advanced works. If you are comfortable with *Gospel-Powered Parenting* and all its principles, then move on to *God, Marriage, and Family* by Andreas Kostenberger. Move to books on the fatherhood of God or books on the Trinity that allow you to study the relationship between the Father and Son. If you are very comfortable with *Decisions, Decisions* or Kevin DeYoung's *Just Do Something*, go to *Decision Making and the Will of God* which is about five times longer.

Identify areas of responsibility and read books to strengthen you there. Wherever your responsibilities are, find books that will allow you to fulfill them with greater skill and greater understanding of biblical principles. Pastors need to make books on preaching and pastoral ministry a regular part of their reading diet. Parents ought to read books on parenting, bosses or owners ought to read books on leadership, and so on. If you are the one who manages your family's finances, read the occasional book that provides a biblical perspective on money (perhaps Randy Alcorn's *Managing God's Money*). If you are a member of a church, read Thabiti Anyabwile's *What Is a Healthy Church Member?*

Tip: Biographies can be very helpful in each of these areas. A biography of a great leader will allow you to be a better leader; a biography of a great leader who was a terrible father will teach you how to avoid succeeding in one area but failing in another.

There are many ways the Lord shapes us and causes us to grow. I do not mean to downplay the value of sermons, personal Bible study and even circumstances. Still, books are a very significant means of the Lord's grace to us.

Read to Lead. Every man is called to lead in some area of life, whether that is leadership in the home, in the workplace, in the church or elsewhere. Good leaders are good readers. There is, of course, lots of anecdotal evidence to prove that the great men of history were readers—find me a great man whose mind was shaped by television and I'll find you a thousand who were shaped by books—but we need more than anecdotal evidence. Help came from Al Mohler and a chapter in *The Conviction to Lead* titled “Leaders are Readers.”

It is obvious that to be a good leader, you need to lead in a distinctly Christian way. Mohler advocates what he calls “convictional intelligence” which he defines as: “the product of learning the Christian faith, diving deeply into biblical truth, and discovering how to think like a Christian.” In other words, the best Christian leaders learn truth, apply it, think like someone who has been formed by it, and lead accordingly. The unavoidable fact is that your convictions determine *where* you lead and *how* you lead. You will not lead opposite to your convictions and you won't lead better than your convictions. Therefore, you need to continually define, develop and refine those convictions. Mohler says “When you find a leader, you have found a reader. The reason for this is simple—there is no substitute for effective reading when it comes to developing and maintaining the intelligence necessary to lead.”

So the question for every man is this: Where are you a leader? This will then direct your reading. It may be very specific: I lead my wife as her husband and I can be a better leader by reading Tim Keller's *The Meaning of Marriage*. It may be less specific than that; I lead my wife as her husband so I need to continue growing in character and holiness and therefore I will read *The Pursuit of Holiness* by Jerry Bridges. As a leader you owe it to those you lead to continue to grow as a leader. Men are leaders and leaders are readers. So read!

Read to Love. While we tend to consider reading as a personal pursuit, it can also be a means of loving others. Here are three ways to love others by being a reader.

Read to understand. I have already said that we should read in order to know the Lord better, to grow in personal development, and to be a better leader. This kind of reading does not benefit you alone, but also those around you. You learn to love your wife better by reading *When Sinners Say “I Do”* by Dave Harvey. You learn to love your church when you read *Love Or Die* by Alexander Strauch. You learn to love your children better when you read *Shepherding a Child's Heart*. That is all important, but there is a second kind of understanding I want to direct you to—understanding other people. If you are a husband, read *Desperate*, a book on mothering, to better understand your wife's responsibilities and challenges. This will help you love her all the more. If you are a church member, read a book on pastoring to better understand your pastor.

Read to recommend. You can love others by recommending books that will help them in their circumstances. This may involve reading books that will apply more to others than to yourself. A married pastor may want to read books on singleness so he can recommend the best ones to the people in his church who are single (and a single pastor may want to read books on marriage). Reading widely allows you to help people in very directed ways.

Read toward discipling. Even better than reading books *for* people is reading books *with* people. When you read books with others, you can let the author be the “Paul” and you and the people you read with can be “Timothys.” I am currently reading *The Discipline of Grace* by Jerry Bridges with 35 young adults and I am reading *Galatians For You* by Tim Keller with my wife. In both cases I initiated reading these books because I knew the others would benefit from it (though, obviously, I benefit as well). I learned to do this from men who took the time to read good books with me.

Conclusion. For some people reading is a great and natural pleasure. These people would read even if they didn't feel compelled to know, to grow, to lead or to love. Yet for other people reading is no pleasure at all. Might I suggest that these people would do well to learn it as a pleasure? Pleasures can be learned! There was a time that I hated coffee, but people kept telling me to learn to enjoy it as a pleasure. I learned to drink it and now find it a great pleasure. In the same way most husbands and wives can attest that they have developed common interests that at one time were not a natural interest. Reading is a pleasure worth learning to love and pursue, even if it requires some effort at first. However, whether it is pleasure or pain, commit yourself to read to know, read to grow, read to lead and read to love.