

Study

INTRODUCTION

The practice of study can be defined as the intentional devotion of time and energy towards understanding a subject. In other words, study is characterized by active engagement with a substantial topic. Study overlaps with devotional reading and shares some of its objects, but study seeks deep intellectual understanding first, with the hope that increased knowledge gives way to greater levels of devotion and service. Though learning about the nature of gifts in the Greco-Roman economy might not seem an exciting topic, it is immensely helpful for us to understand the dynamics of grace in God's relations with us.

PRINCIPLES

1. Goals

The goal of study is to acquire knowledge that enables one to be a more faithful and fruitful person in their pilgrimage in the world. In other words, the goal of study is to provide opportunities for the growth of wisdom. Study also requires that you step outside of yourself—your own biases and immediate concerns—and work to understand something that may not seem immediately relevant to your life. Study should also serve to cultivate intellectual humility by placing one's knowledge in a greater context. Simply grasping the “five points of Calvinism” is less helpful than reading John Calvin's works and understanding them and subsequent developments (such as the so-called “five points”) in proper theological and historical context.

Study corresponds more to the intentional development of physical fitness than it does to rest or recreation. Study aims to increase mental focus, which enables someone to move more complicated obstacles out of their path towards understanding. Thus, one goal of study is to increase one's capacity to approach complicated ideas or questions and deal with them more effectively and efficiently for the benefit of family, church, and community.

Each element of our pilgrimage program is interrelated. Thus, study should enable a person, over the course of his lifetime, to work better, rest better, etc., and those other practices should improve study.

2. Objects of Study

A. Books

One risk with study is that we tell ourselves we are achieving our study goals when we are not actually developing deep understanding and mental focus. Study should give priority to more substantial reads like books and/or journals, which are not the same as listening to podcasts or reading opinion blogs.

B. God's Word

The intentional study of God's Word is essential and should not be neglected. Such study includes but is not exhausted by the common understanding of the “quiet time,” which seeks an immediately applicable lesson and emotional connection. Study of God's Word—both directly and supplemented by commentaries and other study aids—should be a regular part of the Christian's life.

C. Practically Applicable Works

One obvious area of study involves concerns related to our work. Most of us, however, would prefer study be closer to recreation than work. But the pilgrimage practices are oriented to our personal development for the benefit of others and, therefore, involve our work. Study of best practices that relate to your work should not be ignored. Don't be too proud to read *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, even though you don't want to put it on your living room bookshelf.

D. Difficult and Abstract Works

One of the most essential premises for study is that works which do not appear to have immediate value to the student may, down the road, prove essential to living well and serving others. Abstract works may not have any immediate application beyond a change in belief or understanding, but these changes may later become immensely practical. The failure to take on difficult tasks when it comes to study is similar to failing to push oneself in personal fitness, where you maintain a level of health but do not expand your abilities to achieve physical feats. Works that tax one's mental ability, once completed, should become new grounds for confidence in tackling even more complex questions as they present themselves.

PRACTICALS

1. How to Study

- *Individually* -- Individual studying develops attention span and facility with the kinds of regular tasks associated with study, like defining words and looking up important context. Begin with the attitude that you can do things to help yourself understand a particular text instead of feeling the need to rely on others for the basic explanation of what you're examining.
- *Group study* -- While each individual aims to read texts on their own and draw out the essential meaning, there nevertheless remains many facets to a particular texts that no single individual is able to observe, even after multiple readings. Group discussion is a great way of addressing this complexity, and should not be neglected. But bear in mind that groups are drastically impacted by the dedication of the members—if someone neglects individual study, the group's understanding of the subject will suffer.
- *Intentionally* -- Set aside time to study well. Avoid distraction. When you are reading the work you've chosen to study, study away from your computer and put your phone in a different room. If you need to define a word, use a dictionary unless you're confident you can use your phone without checking Instagram, Facebook, the news, etc. Let your spouse or roommate know that you will be studying for a particular time period so that they may help you in this area, OR, invite your them to spend time studying alongside you.
- *Cultivate your own interests* -- While some of your studies should relate to your work, you should study something that is not directly related to your work as well!

2. Obstacles to Study

- *Information overload* -- One of the difficulties of studying in the age of information is that we are so easily overwhelmed with information coming at us from a variety of angles. Take care to make sure that you protect your time of study (see above). Over the course of several years, thoughtful study may actually reverse the feelings of information overload by enabling each of us to focus discretely on the tasks we face day to day.
- *Entertainment* -- It's so much easier to turn on Netflix or read some clickbait on our phones. Work often tires us mentally and we want the mental relaxation that comes in entertainment. This is not bad in itself, but be on guard that you don't neglect study for an entire season by amusing yourself to [intellectual] death.
- *Not knowing your limits* -- Again, the fitness analogy works—if you're not a runner you know not to attempt a marathon on your first jog. Nor should you attempt to read a highly complicated systematic theology if you haven't set up a foundation from which you could tackle the text. If study has been a difficult aspect of the rule to follow, begin with a reasonably challenging text instead. Don't attempt to read a text that may be far outside your grasp at the moment, since that will only discourage you. Rely on your friends who study well to recommend a text.

3. Other Notes

- Study should probably involve basic theological studies. Other areas of study have incredible amounts of value, but theology is essential in order to develop a more wise and faithful Christian community.
- People should study works of practical value and works that do not appear to have immediate value. There are two errors to avoid. On one hand, one can read mostly personal development texts and thus become an effective worker and operator in his community, but lack something to say. On the other hand, the intellectual whose sole focus on abstract works may have given him much to say, without the ability to say it in such a way as to be heard and benefit others. Avoid becoming either of these extremes.
- C.S. Lewis has a great short essay called "On the Reading of Old Books" that is found in the introduction to Athanasius' *On the Incarnation* and is also reproduced in *God in the Dock*. Get motivated by reading it here: <http://www.theelliots.org/Soapbox2008/OntheReadingofOldBooks.pdf>

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Am I currently studying anything at all? If not, why not? What's keeping me from this pursuit?
- Am I focusing my studies on substantial reads?
- Am I studying to develop my knowledge and skill in my work?
- Am I making time to study outside of my occupational pursuits?
- Do I need help from friends to learn how to study well and to make it a priority?