

THE DISCIPLINES OF KNOWING (2): THE HUMANITIES



KNOW, LOVE, SERVE
PART 5

T. M. MOORE

A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

The Disciplines of Knowing (2): The Humanities
Know, Love, Serve: Part 5
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The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Welcome to *The Disciplines of Knowing (2): The Humanities*

Because people are made in the image of God, and because God's common grace is at work blessing and using even His enemies, we should expect many different fields of learning and study to aid us in our desire to increase in the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

The humanities – art, music, literature, history, philosophy, and so forth – is one such area. In the disciplines that make up this field we can learn much about people, the world, and the ideas and artifacts that contribute much of beauty, goodness, and truth to our world.

But we'll need to be persuaded that these areas can really lead us to Jesus if we're going to make room for some of the humanities in our program for growing in the Lord. The lessons in this study will suggest some ways for you to do that profitably.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

And if you find this study helpful, please let us know. How have you benefited from this study? Go to our website, www.ailbe.org, and use the Contact Us button to share your story.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 To Gain Christ

Understanding people can help us in knowing Christ.

But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ... Philippians 3.7, 8

The mature mind

As we round the backstretch of this series on increasing in the knowledge of Jesus Christ, the question that should be occupying our mind is: Just how precious, how truly valuable, is the knowledge of Christ to me? Because, as will be clear by now, we don't increase in the knowledge of Christ without considerable effort. There are skills to be acquired, disciplines to be mastered, new routines to be established, and new ways of using our time to be embrace.

Paul understood this. He knew that Christ had "laid hold" on him for the "upward prize" of the Kingdom and glory of God (Phil. 3.12, 14; 1 Thess. 2.12). He determined that he would do whatever was necessary to "lay hold" on that prize, knowing that the reward that awaited him was Christ Jesus Himself – the King of glory. He resolved to "press on" against every obstacle so that he might increase in "the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3.8). His purpose was to "gain Christ" (Phil. 3.8) – to become so intimate with Him, so ensconced in Him, so constantly in His presence and filled with His power, so spent in His service, that what he insisted on in Philippians 1.21 would be increasingly so in his life: "to me, to live *is* Christ".

But to achieve this objective, to "know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings" (Phil. 3.10), Paul would have to work at it. He would have to give up things he'd done for years, apply himself to new disciplines, learn more about the world and its people, and fill his time, as much as possible, with the disciplined pursuit of Christ (Phil. 3.7, 8). But so excellent did Paul consider this goal, that he rejoiced in pursuing it. He was forever reaching out to learn new things, grow in new ways, increase in his relationship with Jesus, expand his work for Him, and make the most of all the time God gave him each day. He said that living this way is the mark of a mature mind; and he exhorted all who would "have this mind" (Phil. 3.15) to join his example and take up the company of others who did so, as well (Phil. 3.17).

That's how excellent, precious, valuable, glorious, delightful, and joyful Paul found the knowledge of Jesus to be. Can we say the same?

What could be more desirable, more delightful, more satisfying and rewarding, more fraught with fruit-bearing potential, and therefore more exciting to our soul than to increase in the knowledge of Him Who sits at the right hand of God, upholds the cosmos and everything in it by His Word of power, is putting all His enemies under His feet as He builds His Church and brings His Kingdom to earth as it is in heaven, and Who is the Treasury of all wisdom and knowledge?

Don't let the rubbish that clutters your familiar lifestyle rob you of the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. *Work* out your salvation in fear and trembling (Phil. 2.12), beginning with a working regimen of disciplines that allows you to look through all the windows of theological study onto the riches of divine revelation in His Word and His works.

What is man?

At the same time, realize that God, by the grace which He extends even to those who despise or deny Him

(Matt. 5.45), has made it so that His goodness can be found in all the earth (Ps. 33.5) – in the works of creation, but also in the works human beings from every time and culture have wrought. The humanities are that branch of study which, according to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “concern themselves with human beings and their culture.” It continues: “As a group of educational disciplines, the humanities are distinguished in content and method from the physical and biological sciences and, somewhat less decisively, from the social sciences.”

To simplify, while the sciences – which we shall consider a bit further on – seek “objective” knowledge of the world through widely-acknowledged and carefully-observed protocols and means, the humanities provide a more “subjective” look at life and the world, through a wide range of ever-changing disciplines and practices. The humanities allow us to see the world through the eyes and minds of people as they express their understanding of the world. The humanities are “human studies” and so, in a certain sense – given that Christ is the end of all true knowing – can help us in answering the psalmist’s question, “What is man?” (Ps. 8.5)

If you watch the evening news, surf the Internet, try out new recipes, subscribe to a magazine, watch TV, listen to music, go to school or take a course, laugh at a good joke or funny story, watch movies, keep a garden, decorate your home, follow trends in fashion, read books, or any of a thousand other activities, you are involved in the humanities. That is, you are already fully and happily immersed in the products of people’s thinking and workmanship; but I wonder how often you stop to consider how the goodness of the Lord might be known through such things?

The humanities

In this part of our study I want to demonstrate the value of the humanities for helping us press on toward the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Necessarily, our survey will be limited. My goals are to heighten your awareness of the ways you are already involved in the humanities, and to stimulate you to a more discerning use of such disciplines as music, art, literature, history, and philosophy. Further, I hope to show you how to connect the fruit of these disciplines with the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, in the hope of further enriching your experience of knowing, loving, and serving Him.

In a sense, the humanities represent a sub-discipline of creational theology. What we learned about practicing that discipline – together with our increasing mastery of all the disciplines of theological study – will help the humanities come alive for us in new ways, so that they enhance the way we use our time and brighten the path that leads to the precious and valuable knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We’ll only have space to look at a few examples; however, I hope to point you to a wide range of resources, awaiting your exploration and perusal, to help you grow in knowing, loving, and serving the Lord of glory and King of life.

For Reflection

1. What “rubbish” (Phil. 3.7 8) is holding you back from a more exciting and fruitful pursuit of Jesus Christ?
2. How many different ways can you see that you are already involved in “the humanities” – the use of things with are the product of human thinking, imagining, and creating? How can you see God’s goodness in these things?
3. What would you be willing to do to take up a more disciplined and fruitful study of the humanities, so as to increase in the knowledge of Jesus Christ?

Next Steps – Preparation: For one day, jot down your answer to question 2 above – for everything that fits the category outlined there. Try to find one reason to praise the Lord for His goodness in each of the things you list. At the end of the day, praise and thank Him for them all, and talk to Him of how they help you think about Him more clearly.

2 Music

Music can be an instrument and an expression of the Spirit of God.

And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another in the fear of God. Ephesians 5.18-21

Music and salvation

In a June 4, 2012 posting at *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, University of Virginia professor Mark Edmundson asked, “Can music save your life?” He wondered about this, first, because he had experienced the power of music – specifically, that of Bob Dylan – to “kick open a door” in his life, leading him into a new outlook, new aspirations, and new behaviors.

But he also raised the question because he observed how assiduously and continuously his students listened to music, although he could never get them to talk about it. They seemed almost addicted to their music, yet unable – or unwilling – to explain its allure or effects. When he suggested that great thinkers like Plato expressed concern about the power of music to shape affections in undesirable ways, his students bristled, then opined that Plato was wrong.

Augustine (354-430 AD) understood the power of music to move people in their affections, attitudes, and actions. He was exhibit 1 in his case, since it was hearing the psalms sung in the church in Milan that softened his heart toward the Gospel. He rejoiced that music had such power to open his heart to new possibilities of faith and life; but he also cautioned that those possibilities might not always be to our benefit. In his *Confessions*, Augustine observed concerning the singing of psalms, “For at one time I seem to myself to give them more honour than is seemly, feeling our minds to be more holily and fervently raised unto a flame of devotion, by the words themselves when thus sung, than when not; and that the several affections of our spirit, by a sweet variety, have their own proper measures in the voice and singing, by some hidden correspondence wherewith they are stirred up.” Singing the psalms engendered powerful affections within him, affections that ultimately led him to trust in Jesus.

But he quickly added, “But this contentment of the flesh, to which the soul must not be given over to be enervated, doth oft beguile me, the sense not so waiting upon reason as patiently to follow her; but having been admitted merely for her sake, it strives even to run before her, and lead her. Thus in these things I unawares sin, but afterwards am aware of it.” When the emotions stirred by music overpower reason, we can end up falling into sinful attitudes and actions.

Music can’t save our lives – as Mark Edmundson concludes – but it can change us. Not always suddenly or dramatically, but truly, and lastingly in some cases. For music has power to engage our affections, invade our thinking, and insinuate values and priorities into our soul. And for all these reasons, Plato was correct to issue his caveat about music. Music can be dangerous.

But for precisely the same reasons, music can also be a glorious resource for leading us more deeply into the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. Music of all kinds can be both an instrument of the Spirit and an expression of the Spirit as He leads us into a richer, fuller experience of Jesus.

Music and the soul

Music is powerful to effect change in our lives because it works from the inside-out. We find a particular *melody* to be pleasing to our ear, engaging our heart for delight. We want to hear that melody again, and again,

and again.

If the melody is particularly powerful, it can obscure the *message* of the music, whether or not that message is conveyed by actual words. I recall an incident in my ministry when, as we were setting up for a workshop, a young man who was helping me was humming the melody to John Lennon's "Imagine." I knew the song, but I asked him what he was humming. He said, "Imagine, by John Lennon." I asked him why he was humming that song. He said he loved it. It was so sweet, so much in sync with his own attitudes and desires, and that it expressed such a feeling of longing and hope. When I pointed out that the words of that song expressed the hope that all religion would soon be done away with, he was shocked. He knew the words were there, but he'd never thought about them, so powerful was the effect of the melody on his soul.

Because music excites the emotions and engages the mind, it also can insinuate itself into the values, and adjust the priorities of the conscience. We can literally sing our way to a firmer resolve for righteousness, or into the path of debauchery.

Music of all kinds reaches us every day. Advertisers understand its power, as do politicians, athletic teams, and video games. Music can excite, sooth, depress, delight, and otherwise affect the heart. It reinforces settled ideas and teaches new ways of thinking to the mind. And it insinuates values and priorities in the conscience, not all of which may be the most edifying: "Gimme money, that's what I want!"

But because music can be both an instrument of the Spirit and an expression of His work in our lives, we need to make sure we have plenty of it, and that we're letting music do its God-intended work of leading us deeper into the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Music unto the Lord

All kinds of music are available to those who know the Lord, to help us in our desire to know Him better, love Him more, and serve Him more faithfully in the world. Praise music and hymns – including singing the psalms – as well as great spiritual works of the past, such as "Messiah", should provide a foundation for our musical interests; but on that foundation we may build a superstructure of classical music, jazz, folk, show tunes, pop music, and more to help us increase in the knowledge of the Lord – as long, that is, as all our involvement in music is done unto the Lord.

In two ways we should make sure that our use of music is unto the Lord. First, work to *understand* the music you're listening to – how the melodies, harmonies, and instruments work together to create a unified and pleasing sound; what the lyrics mean; what moods the music suggests; and how the music affects you spiritually. Think through the effects of any piece of music on your soul – heart, mind, and conscience. Is it uniformly positive? Learn about different kinds of music, and work to acquire new tastes. If, for any song or piece or type of music you're listening to, you can give honest, sincere, and specific thanks to the Lord, then this is music you can enjoy in His Name.

Second, consider how the music you listen to fits you for serving others. Does it effect changes in your soul, either of attitude or desire, leading you to want to serve others more? Does it enlarge the horizon of your understanding of the world, and of your desire to be a faithful vessel for the Lord? Does it move you to want to bring joy to others? Would sharing your music be a way to encourage or edify a friend, or even a source of lively conversation, leading to thanksgiving?

Beware of listening to music just because you like the beat or find the melody enthralling. We can appreciate all kinds of music without being shaped by it in sinful ways. But we'll need to have both our minds *and* hearts involved, lest, as Augustine warned, emotion override good sense and we fall into sinful ways.

God delights in music, and when we delight in it as He does, music can help us grow in the knowledge of the

Lord.

For Reflection

1. What are your favorite kinds of music? Why?
2. Why do we say that hymns, praise songs, and classical spiritual works – like “Messiah” – should provide the foundation of our musical interests?
3. Can you think of a song that has powerfully affected you? In what ways? Did the song give you a greater appreciation of the Lord? A greater love for Him? Did it move you, or make you want to be moved, to share with others?

Next Steps – Preparation: For the next few days, be conscious of the music you hear. Ask questions about it. Try to discern whether and how any of it moves you. Talk with a friend about your observations.

3 Art

Art can be an important resource for increasing in the knowledge of Jesus.

So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Genesis 1.27

Made to create

As the image-bearers of God, people are made both to create and to appreciate and benefit from the creative works of others. God is the great Artist. He uses every conceivable form and genre to communicate His beauty, goodness, and truth into the world. He has hidden His glory in all His works, and He calls us to discover from those works what He is communicating about Himself (Prov. 25.2; Rom. 1.18-21).

The works of art “commissioned” by God in Scripture demonstrate His willingness to use art for His purposes. The tabernacle and its furnishings, the priestly garments, the temple, the psalms and other poetry in the Bible – all these reach us in unique ways and draw us deeper into the knowledge of the Lord. Jesus affirmed that people are able to do beautiful things that bring honor and glory to Him (Mk. 14.6, where the Greek word *καλός* can mean both *beautiful* and *good*).

The art humans create can be a mirror of the divine process of creating, and a pointer to the Lord Jesus Himself. We should expect, therefore, that art can be an interesting, enjoyable, and enriching resource for helping us increase in the knowledge of God.

As Dorothy Sayers points out in her book, *The Mind of the Maker*, all human beings are creative, and not merely in the arts. All of life offers abundant opportunities for people to work creatively. But in art, creativity comes to a sharp focus; and in the creative works of human beings, we can see something of God’s Being and character.

Dorothy Sayers points out that the process of human creativity offers a glimpse into the mystery of the divine Trinity. God exists in three Persons – the Father (Who ordains), the Son (Who executes what God ordains), and the Holy Spirit (Who applies what the Son has accomplished). All Three are one God, though each Member of the Trinity has a different role in the divine economy.

Similarly, every work of creativity – in the arts or otherwise – reflects this triune template, because people are made in God’s image. In any work of art, first comes the Idea (what to paint, sculpt, or write), which is like the Father. Then the Energy gets to work, to bring the Idea to form, as Jesus did during His incarnation. Finally, once the work is finished, the Power it carries to interpret the Idea recalls the work of the Holy Spirit, Who teaches us all things.

By understanding the arts – the ideas and themes, genre and media, and interpretations of works – we can grow in our appreciation of the greatness of God’s work and the infinite variety of His beauty. This is true, Dorothy Sayers insists, whether or not the individual artist we’re studying is conscious of reflecting God in his work. We’re made in God’s image, and whatever we create invites contemplation of the creative process and the great Artist Who upholds the cosmos and the artists who adorn it.

The usefulness of art

We don’t turn to the arts *because* they are useful to us, at least, not *merely* because they are useful. But the arts *are* useful and can aid us in pursuing our calling to the Kingdom and glory of God.

Studying works of art, meditating on the themes, pondering the way all the separate parts – colors, textures, themes, moods, imagery, and so forth – work together as a unified whole, and drawing conclusions about the meaning of a work, can train our minds to analyze, our hearts to discern, and our consciences to approve or disapprove. By thus exercising the components of our soul, art can help us be more aware of and sensitive to the Presence of God in all His works. By learning to look at art, we train ourselves to look at the world as well, and to see more of God’s Presence and glory there.

Art is also useful for enjoyment, in bringing the delight of beautiful works, interesting ideas, and important themes into our purview and perhaps – if only through inexpensive prints – even into our homes. Learning to enjoy art can help us enjoy God, Who is supremely beautiful, unfathomably interesting, and important above all else. Our enjoyment of God – and, with it, our love for Him – will increase as we look to the arts to teach us how to recognize and appreciate beauty, goodness, and truth in various forms.

Art can also serve as a witness to our worldview. The art we study, enjoy, talk about, encourage others to consider, and display in our homes can provide abundant opportunities to explain what we believe. “I just think it’s pretty” should not suffice when a guest asks about a particular picture hanging on our wall. So much more could be said; and when a work of art opens a door for conversation, we should be ready to go through, and to share our experience of God through the works of art we are coming to understand and enjoy.

Getting started

Art is obviously a vast, complex, and potentially confusing field of study. We don’t have to master it all, but we should be able to appreciate certain works and artists for how they help us in learning to know, love, and serve our Lord Jesus Christ. Make up your mind that you’re going to get an art education, sufficient to help you gain some of the benefit of learning Jesus, that this aspect of the humanities can provide.

You might do some reading about the history of Christian art. Books and online resources are available to help. Since a great deal of Western art uses Christian themes, you should have no trouble identifying several works that will reinforce, illustrate, or expand your understanding of Jesus. Look for help from those who understand the arts and how they work. Visit a museum and chat with a docent there about a work of art that interests you. Learn to look at works of art so that you study them like you might a book, asking questions about images and their placement, titles of works, color palettes, use of light, line and proportion, and more; making notes in a journal; and sharing your observations and questions with others. Art can open up new vistas on the beauty and greatness of God as He speaks to you through works of art.

Let the arts have a new and edifying role in your home. You don’t have to turn your home into an art museum to have a few replica pieces that remind you constantly of the Lord. Above my workspace hangs a print of a painting by Vermont artist Peter Huntoon, entitled “[Spring Confluence](#)”. The coming together of those two springs into one river puts me in mind of many spiritual truths: our Lord’s incarnation, for example; the fact that our world is made up of both seen and unseen realities; and that we as human beings are creatures of both matter and spirit.

Apps are also available that can present works of art and give you some rudimentary guidance in understanding what you’re viewing. But you’ll have to think, pray, talk with others, and reflect deeply on works of art before they draw back the veil and give you a glimpse, through their Ideas, Energies, and Powers, into the greatness, majesty, beauty, and mystery of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The arts provide a broad and fascinating field of study to help us increase in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. You’ll have to work a bit to get the hang of how the arts can help us grow in the Lord, but the effort will be worthwhile.

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For reflection

1. Do you have a favorite work of art that you have enjoyed over the years? Does this work of art turn your thoughts to the Lord? In what way?
2. What would you have to give up time-wise in order to begin learning more about the arts, and how they can help you increase in the knowledge of the Lord?
3. How do you expect learning to appreciate art will help you see more of the glory of God throughout the day?

Next steps – Transformation: Choose one work of art that you are familiar with and enjoy. Start asking questions about the Idea of this work, the Energies (genre, images, etc.), and its message (Power). Study it like Jacob, wrestling with the angel, and ask the Lord to bless you with some insight into His beauty, goodness, and truth. Share this exercise with a friend.

4 Reading

Is our generation somehow above the discipline of reading?

Bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas when you come—and the books, especially the parchments. 2 Timothy 4.13

Constant reading?

In his commentary on 2 Timothy 4.13, John Calvin issued a resounding affirmation of the importance of reading, and a rebuke to those who have let this discipline go into decline: “It is evident from this, that the Apostle had not given over reading, though he was already preparing for death. Where are those who think that they have made so great progress that they do not need any more exercise? Which of them will dare to compare himself with Paul? Still more does this expression refute the madness of those men who — despising books, and condemning all reading — boast of nothing but their own ἐνθουσιασμούς — ‘divine inspirations’. But let us know that this passage gives to all believers a recommendation of constant reading, that they may profit by it.”

Central to the benefit to be derived from all humanistic studies is the discipline of reading. As Bethany Williamson wrote in a recent issue of the *Christian Scholar’s Review*, “At the crux of ‘the humanities,’ literature reminds and teaches us what it means to be human.” Reading — poetry and literature, art and music history, history, philosophy, and more — enables us, according to Williamson, “to inhabit the world more compassionately and charitably.” She encourages readers to “engage in the practice of slow reading, delighting in the turns of phrase, sparkling syntax, broken characters, and beautiful imagery that stir our souls toward beauty, worship and repentance as we learn first to see and then to empathize with the struggles, sufferings, and stories of others.” She insists, “the practice of close reading can be an exercise in spiritual formation, for through it we learn what it means to show charity and hospitality toward authors, characters, and fellow readers...” Such reading can make us “attentive, alert, and alive.”

Those are solid commendations of a discipline that is sadly in decline among the members of the Christian community. Many believers have replaced reading with listening — to praise music, podcasts, and news bites — and have devoted what reading they actually do to scanning the relatively insipid postings on their social media pages. It’s all many of us can do to find the time to read the Bible, much less anything else that might help us increase in the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Calvin recommends “constant reading”; Bethany Williamson encourages “slow reading”; Susie and I want to affirm your current practice of reading, and encourage you to put away as much as you can that clouds available time for reading, and take Calvin’s and Ms. Williamson’s exhortations to heart.

Reading poetry

I want to urge you to rediscover the beauty, wonder, and delight of poetry. The state of much modern poetry does not encourage us to take a liking to verse. Much of it is formless, without rhyme or bright images, and too self-referential to offer much in the way of reliable meaning. You can slog your way through the free verse introspections of contemporary poetry, but by the time you give it up, you may wish you’d never started in the first place.

I encourage you to pay attention to poetry that uses classic forms — structure, meter, rhyme — and works to bring pleasure and meaning to the reader, not just the poet. Poetry can teach you to read closely and slowly; it allows you to peer “into the depth of a moment” (to quote Molly Peacock); it confronts you with compelling images; and it can reach into the recesses of your soul, to reveal things you may not have previously known to be there, or to be wanting there.

Poetry helps us learn how to look at the world as part of a larger whole that is fraught with significance throughout, and that ultimately encourages us to worship and praise Him Who made and upholds this amazing cosmos by His sheer, powerful Word.

Emily Dickinson was not a Christian. But she could not help but see God's handiwork in the simplest, most ordinary aspects of creation:

How happy is the little Stone
That rambles in the Road alone,
And doesn't care about Careers
And Exigencies never fears –
Whose Coat of elemental Brown
A passing Universe put on,
And independent as the Sun
Associates or glows alone,
Fulfilling absolute Decree
In casual simplicity –

Find a few poets like Dickinson – Wendell Berry, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Richard Wilbur – and learn to read their poems closely and slowly. You will find your soul stimulated to know the One Who gives such gifts of composition to people.

He's the same One Who filled more than half of His Bible with poetry.

Reading literature

We should also read from a wide range of other kinds of literature. No one I know is more consistent or fruitful in this than my wife, Susie; so, I asked her for some comments on the value of reading literature. She told me that, besides helping to make her a better editor, reading widely allows her to encounter a wide range of interesting people and fascinating stories. It helps her see into the souls of people, and to understand why they do what they do, and how others often suffer as a result, which increases empathy and compassion in her.

Susie finds reading delightful. She marvels at the beauty of words and syntax, and the variety of ways they are combined to communicate ideas and describe people. She loves learning new things and relearning old ones as she reads; and she is particular about the need to hold a book in her hands while she reads, for the sheer aesthetic enjoyment of turning pages (I'm an e-reader guy). Books show us about the dangers of sin, about ordinary people who are interesting in extraordinary ways, and about the power of words to move people, and of God's Word to move the cosmos.

I put a few of Susie's favorite authors before her for a quick response: Anne Tyler – "Her people are infinitely ordinary and interesting." Sue Grafton – "She understood people and their depravities, and that our sins don't only affect us." Wallace Stegner – "His is beautiful and descriptive writing." Ann Patchett – "She tells a good story with characters who are intricately described." Fyodor Dostoevsky – "He describes people and their souls so well." Barbara Kingsolver – "What an excellent writer!"

That's enough to excite me to improve my own reading habits. We hope it will do the same for you.

Reading opens an infinite number of interesting pathways to Jesus. The more you read, the more you'll see Him back of every person, every story line, every image, and every rhyme. As Hopkins wrote, "Christ plays in 10,000 places", and He is "lovely to look at" in the literary works of people from all places and times.

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For reflection

1. How would you describe your own reading habits at this time? Can you see a way you might increase your reading?
2. Why do you think so many Christians read so little? What can you do to encourage them?
3. Do you have a reading plan? Have you ever thought of developing one? Do you have a friend or friends with whom you could read and discuss books? Do you think having that would help you read more?

Next Steps – Transformation: Find three hours in the coming week for reading. What will have to go so that you can do that? What will you read? With whom will you share what you're reading?

5 History

Don't know much about history? You can fix that.

For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope. Romans 15.4

Interest in history?

There is truth to the adage, attributed to George Santayana, that those who remain ignorant of history are doomed to repeat its mistakes. What Paul said about the writings of the Old Testament can be equally said, with modifications, about the records of history. We have much to learn from making the study of history part of our ongoing effort at increasing in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. And if we read history through the lens of Scripture, then we will see Jesus at work on every page, and our devotion to Him will soar.

The ignorance and indifference to history on the part of many Christians today is disappointing. In one sense, it's just a reflection of the larger disdain for history which seems to characterize many in our day. But since so much of history has been affected by the progress of the Gospel, and since so many Christians in history have made important contributions to human wellbeing, it is regrettable that believers today show no more interest in history than they do.

What is the source of this neglect of history, and what can we do to remedy it?

In his book, *The Origins of History*, Herbert Butterfield, explained that the neglect of history, as a discipline for moral instruction, began in the 19th century, when God's role in history was shoved aside, and history was made the plaything of "chance and contingency". The first Christian historians – Eusebius, Sozomen, Socrates Scholasticus, and Augustine – writing in the fourth and fifth centuries, readily acknowledged and carefully discerned the sovereignty of God in the affairs of men and nations. This template for historical writing, which was grounded in the Biblical doctrines of providence and redemption, held sway in the Western world through the middle of the 18th century.

But all that changed once Enlightenment thinking began to leach into all the disciplines of study and learning.

The secularizing of history

Following the lead of French *philosophes*, writers with a strictly secular agenda imposed their views on all disciplines of learning. History was no exception. As Butterfield explains, historians stood on a foundation of truth laid down by centuries of Christian thinkers, yet they repudiated the faith convictions of that worldview and set about to create a brave new world apart from any need for God. Butterfield explains, "they did not recognise how much Christianity had shaped their minds, how much their secular ideals went back to the first principles of the Christian religion."

As these "lapsed Christians" – as Butterfield calls them – began writing history as a "self-explanatory" discipline – that is, without any need of or reference to God – and as their writings began to be accepted in an academic world ready to throw off the moral constraints of the Christian faith, history lost its identity as the story of God's unfolding Kingdom. And once it lost its identity, it lost its significance for the vast majority of people, including most Christians.

The result, over the past 150 years, has been the production of histories of various sorts in which it is clear God has no involvement and, apparently, no interest in the affairs of people and nations. And contemporary Christians, guided by the world spirit of our postmodern age, have all too willingly washed their hands of

history and the many benefits it holds out for those who know how to read and study it for the purpose of knowing, loving, and serving Jesus.

The writing of history

The discipline of writing history is called, historiography. Writing history might seem uncomplicated – difficult, to be sure, but not really all that complex. It involves gathering the facts about a certain period, incident, person, or trend, and arranging those facts into an interesting story. Certainly, this is part of the process; however, much more is involved in the writing of history than simply bringing forward the facts and details of the past for remembrance and review in the present.

Every historian has an axe to grind. The writing of history begins with an outlook, a philosophy, or a worldview which colors and guides everything. A book of history – or a course, lecture, or even a conversation – is not simply a rehearsing of facts. All history represents the presentation, elaboration, and defense of a worldview. No matter the subject or the depth of the report, every historian is seeking to advance an outlook on life, and to promote a cherished vision of the way things ought to be. It is good for those who read history to be aware of this; otherwise, they might find themselves agreeing with conclusions that are at odds with their own understanding of life and its purpose.

For those who do not read history, the danger is that they lose all sense of their true past, and thus all significance for their present or future.

Keep the proper focus

You may discover a grain of truth, and often more, in almost every approach to writing history. But Christians are interested, as we take up the study of history, in the unfolding of the divine economy and the progress of Jesus' Kingdom, as it comes on earth. As we begin to remedy our neglect of history, let us not be naïve, and let us not take a willy-nilly approach to the study of this important field. Be aware of the perspective any historian brings to his work; at the same time, work at developing your own understanding of the true nature of history, so that, as you read and study history, you'll be able to see the hand of God at work, in spite of whatever bias the historical writer might bring to his task

Read from all kinds of histories – of nations, movements, institutions, disciplines (art, music, sports). Read surveys of periods or topics, and read specific studies which are more narrowly focused. Look for historians who share your Christian convictions about history, such as Marilynne Robinson, George Marsden, Mark Knoll, and Paul Johnson. Reading a book like Paul Johnson's *Modern Times* can give you a whole new – and more reliable – perspective on the 20th century, one that can help you truly understand that marvelous, mad, and murderous century. Marilynne Robinson's historical essays, *What Are We Doing Here?*, will give you a new appreciation of the Puritans.

Choose a few figures from history and read biographies. For my money, Alexander the Great is the greatest pagan who ever lived (I'd be happy to explain why), and Robin Lane Fox's biography makes the great 4th century Greek tyrant come alive. Read about great saints, artists, poets, statesmen, inventors, or philanthropists. Let their lives help you to appreciate more of God's common grace, and lead you in thanksgiving for the Lord Who made and sustained and used such people throughout the course of history.

Read collections of historical documents – such as those associated with the American Founding, or the speeches and letters of great personages, or even the journals of brilliant thinkers or artists.

History has much to teach about the greatness, goodness, wisdom, power, and love of our Lord Jesus Christ. If we put on our Scripture lens as we take up the study of history, we will see the handiwork of our Lord everywhere, and this will help us to increase in love for and devotion to Him.

The Disciplines of Knowing (2): The Humanities

For Reflection

1. Do you have a favorite period of history? Or favorite event? Or person? Can you see how thinking more carefully about these can help you grow in love for Jesus?
2. Why do you think people today care so little about history?
3. Where might you begin to do more reading and study in history? Why should you?

Next Steps – Preparation: What would you most like to learn about history? Make some notes, then start searching for a resource or two to get you started.

6 Philosophy

Understand the ideas, or get sideswiped by the consequences.

Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power. Colossians 2.8-10

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ... 2 Corinthians 10.3-5

A tapestry of ideas

History is comprised, in many ways, of a tapestry of ideas. As people in every age have considered their world, themselves, and the challenges facing them, they have developed philosophies, schemes of history, narratives about themselves and their needs, values, and priorities, and cultural projects that flourish for a season, exert influence, and then are replaced by other philosophies, schemes, and projects.

One of the most interesting and fruitful approaches to gaining an understanding of history, and to following the unfolding of the divine economy, is by studying the history of ideas. The ideas and systems that people have evolved to explain themselves and their world are the result of reflection, discussion, debate, and careful thinking. Because people are made in the image of God, and because the world refracts the glory of God on every hand, it is inevitable that every philosophy ever developed will contain some germ of truth. C. S. Lewis argued this point in his book, *The Abolition of Man*, and he illustrated his position in the samples of the *Tao* which he provided at the end of that book.

But no philosophy or system of thought developed apart from Jesus Christ, or not leading us to Him, will be reliable in its entirety. Winds of doctrine in every age seek to blow the followers of Christ off course as they sail on their journey with Him (Eph. 4.14). We can sift the true elements from the various philosophies of history – as we see Paul doing in Acts 17.22-34 – but not unless we are aware of how the treacherous winds blow, and what may be gained from any of them.

And for that, we're going to have to study the tapestry of ideas from throughout the course of human history, acknowledging the work of God's common grace where we can, and steering clear of the half-truths and lies that might drive us onto the rocks of a shipwrecked faith (cf. 1 Tim. 1.18-20).

The broad scope of philosophy

Philosophy is that discipline of the humanities that seeks to explain the world, to identify humankind's place in it, and to prescribe the best ways to thrive and be happy. Philosophy is comprised of many different sub-disciplines, including cosmology, anthropology, epistemology, aesthetics, and ethics. Philosophers from before the time of Christ have developed expansive systems of thought to summarize, collate, declare, and defend their views about the world. They have used a wide variety of literary genre, including poetry, drama, fiction, scientific reportage, dialectic, and straight philosophical discourse.

The pool of philosophy is filled with murky water; not all of it is safe. You might want to locate a reliable Christian guide to help you know where to drop your hook in that pool, and how to keep from falling in over your head. Christian thinkers such as Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolstertorff, Cornelius Van Til, Francis Schaeffer, David Naugle, Esther Lightcap Meek, David Wolfe, Arthur Holmes, Charles Taylor, James K. A. Smith, and J. P. Moreland are reliable guides to the study of philosophy, offering a clear and Biblical Christian

lens through which to study the entire field. While their works can be challenging, reflections by such thinkers are available for all levels of reading and study. Under the guidance of such trusted thinkers, you can fish the waters of philosophy to gather a catch you can keep from nearly every philosophical system “under the sun”.

Don’t launch out into the pool of philosophy without making sure you are firmly tethered to the Word of God. There is light to be discovered in the world’s various philosophical systems, but you will not be able to discern it apart from the constant, steady, unfailing light of Scripture (Ps. 36.9). In whatever subject or field of philosophy you choose to venture, be sure that you are reading the Scriptures for what they teach about the subject as you go.

Start your reading and study of philosophy with an accessible and reliable Christian book. I recommend David Naugle’s *Philosophy: A Student’s Guide*, David L. Wolfe’s *Epistemology: The Justification of Belief*, or Arthur Holmes’ *All Truth is God’s Truth*. For a fun romp through the history of philosophy, try *Sophie’s World* by Jostein Gaarder and Paulette Moller. These will help you understand the parameters and importance of philosophy as a way of increasing in the knowledge of Christ. They will also show you how to connect your reading in this area with relevant sections of the Word of God.

Lessons from the history of ideas

Studying the ideas of philosophy is important for several reasons. First, it shows us that human beings have an unquenchable desire for truth – even if they often head off in wrong directions. If we can understand the truth as it appears to people “under the sun”, we’ll be better able to lead them to consider the truth of Jesus and life “under heaven”.

Second, by reading and studying philosophy we learn how, by separating truth from God, truth becomes mired in human conjecture, typically leading to philosophical and moral confusion, cultural decay, and social unraveling. We can avoid stepping into the snares of the vain philosophies of men if we can learn to recognize them in the path ahead (Prov. 1.17).

Third, reading philosophy – especially in the light of God’s Word – reminds us that redemption is always possible when people will repent of their folly and turn to God in faith, seeking through Jesus the true Way to life and happiness. When we see thinkers and saints like Justin Martyr, Augustine, C. S. Lewis, and others, turning from the world’s philosophy to the cross of Jesus, we encounter living embodiments of how philosophy can provide a road to knowing the Lord.

We are barraged by thoughts and ideas all day long. They come at us from pop culture, advertising, office chatter, politics, the media, and conversations with friends. All those thoughts and ideas emerge from a philosophical context, *even if that context is unknown to those who are issuing the ideas*. The Christian is called to take every thought and every idea captive for obedience to Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 10.3-5). The better we understand those ideas, the easier it will be for us to bring them into the presence of Christ and His Word, to evaluate their merit, benefit from whatever grace of God may be found in them, and guard ourselves against being sideswiped by unfamiliar ideas that creep into our own thinking unrecognized (Schaeffer).

Philosophy can provide some spice for your Christian growth diet. Just be sure you know what you’re dipping into, and that you use it sparingly.

For Reflection

1. Why is it important that Christians have some understanding about philosophy? How does Proverbs 1.17 relate to this question?
2. You don’t have to be a philosopher to be influenced by philosophy. Explain.

3. How would you counsel a Christian, going off to college, to prepare to stand firm for Christ against the worldly philosophies he will encounter there?

Next Steps – Preparation: Today, try to observe how many different ways an idea or thought comes at you. Jot them down. Summarize the thought. What does it seem to be teaching? Can you see a philosophy behind this?

7 The Value of Museums

There is more to experience in museums than just what meets the eye.

The LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made every tree grow that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. Genesis 2.8, 9

More than pretty pictures

Next to being at home, my favorite place on earth is a museum – the Brandywine River Museum, in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania.

I never tire of visiting this wonder. I like museums in general, those expansive *Wunderkammer* of pictures, artifacts, and interesting exhibits. The Brandywine, which houses the works of N. C. Wyeth, Andrew Wyeth, and Jamie Wyeth, is just my favorite among many, including the Museum of Appalachia in east Tennessee, and the Shelburne Museum, just a bit west of us here in Vermont.

We live in a society that has been wooed, wowed, and won by mass culture, which is relentless in its pursuit of our affections and devotion. From podcasts to the music we download or listen to on the radio, the TV shows and films we watch, websites and game apps we use, and much, much more, our generation is besieged, besotted, and benumbed by the throwaway culture of immediate gratification. When we aren't working, eating, or sleeping, we are under the spell of mass culture.

Which simply means that we have little time for more thoughtful cultural activity, such as looking at art, reading poetry or history or philosophy, or spending a day in a museum. Made in the image of God, and endowed with the ability to appreciate beautiful things, we deserve a culture which challenges our souls, stretches our vision, and helps us to grow in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And this is precisely what museums can do for us. There is nothing quite like a trip to a museum to shake us free from the grip of mass culture, so that we can rediscover the joys of more durable and thoughtful cultural activity. Museums offer more than just pretty pictures. They are showcases of ideas, snapshots of great moments in history, and glimpses into the desires and passions of the human soul. If we approach visiting a museum with the right frame of mind, we may expect to encounter much that is beautiful and good, some that is disturbing and displeasing, and many ways to give thanks to God and to marvel at the creative genius with which He has endowed people.

How to visit a museum

In his book, *How to Visit a Museum*, David Finn provides a helpful list of general principles for visiting an art museum. First, he says, look for things that please you. Walk around until you see things that make you stop, or smile, or wonder. Note them, and plan to return to them for more careful consideration in due course.

Second, as you return to each of the items you have noted and begin to study them more carefully, ask questions about the object you're viewing. What themes does it present? How do the lines and colors work? Why does this piece appeal to you? Who made it, and when? What was going on in the art world at that time?

Third, keep in mind that you can't absorb everything in one visit. Just focus on two or three objects per visit, and make as many observations as you can. Finn explains, "The most successful museum visits are those on which you come across one overwhelming work. It might be a different one on different visits to the same museum, depending on your mood, but when that explosion takes place the experience is almost unbearable. A powerful experience in front of one great work of art can make a museum visit totally fulfilling."

Fourth, be careful to look only – no touching.

Finally, try to find something from your visit that you can share with someone else. David Finn: “There is no question that the opportunity to tell a friend what you have discovered in a painting or a sculpture [or other artifact] enhances the experience.”

In looking at a work of art, first, make sure you know the title and artist. If you have your phone with you, and can quickly look the artist up, or if the museum has a catalog you can consult, try to find out a little background on the artist and the painting. Define the theme or subject of the work in your own words: “Andrew Wyeth’s painting ‘[Cold Spring](#)’ is about winter overstaying her welcome.” Note the various objects in the painting itself – a languid river, a small dory tied to the bank, a leafless sycamore towering over the whole scene, a dark and dull rise in the background. How do these work together? Why would someone paint this? Ask more questions – about the mood of the painting, the use of symbols, the primary message, and so forth. Say a few words to yourself – or better, write them in a journal with all the rest of your musings – about how the object you are viewing affects you. How does it make you feel? Does it remind you of anything? Introduce you to some new thought? Help you to appreciate something you’ve never noticed before?

As you reflect on your observations, offer some thoughts about how this object leads you to think about Christ. For me, “Cold Spring” conveys a longing for new life; it’s a complaint against the lingering cold of dead, lifeless winter, and a patient yearning for the buds, flowers, and flowing streams that come with the new life of spring. Jesus gives us new life; He also gives us the seasons of the year (Gen. 1.14; Ps. 104.19; Dan. 2.21). And He faithfully brings the spring each year – on His schedule, not ours – sometimes delaying to enhance that longing for life which He has painted onto the soul of every person.

Humanities stew

A museum is a kind of humanities stew. You know how a stew has to simmer, all the flavors melding together, until the aroma is just right; then the experience of savoring the stew as a whole is greater eating than any or all of the individual parts alone.

That’s what museums are like for me. They bring together the best of humankind’s creative efforts and invite us to consider the marvel of creativity, the beauty of art and sculpture and other artifacts, the meditations of creative hearts and minds, and the inescapable need for human beings to create and enjoy beauty.

Museums can help to satisfy your desire to know Christ better by bringing to you a wide range of objects and experiences that provoke you to wonder and lead you to praise. Visit a museum, and simmer in its rich aromas of beauty, goodness, and truth.

For reflection

1. Do you have a favorite museum? Explain.
2. How is a museum like a “humanities stew”?
3. What could you do to prepare for a visit to a museum, to make sure your visit helped you to grow in the knowledge of Christ?

Next Steps – Transformation: Find a museum in your area – any museum – and plan a trip. Take an afternoon and, using the guidelines in this article, let your visit be a time of growing in love for Christ.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Why do we say that theology is the “discipline pursuit of the knowledge of God and His glory”? How does that make all of theologians?
2. In what ways are the theological disciplines like “windows” on divine revelation?
3. Briefly define the six “windows” on divine revelation which are the disciplines of the theological study.
4. Why do we say that Biblical theology is the foundation, and spiritual theology is the core of all theological study?
5. What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned from this study? How are you putting that lesson to work in your Personal Mission Field?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.