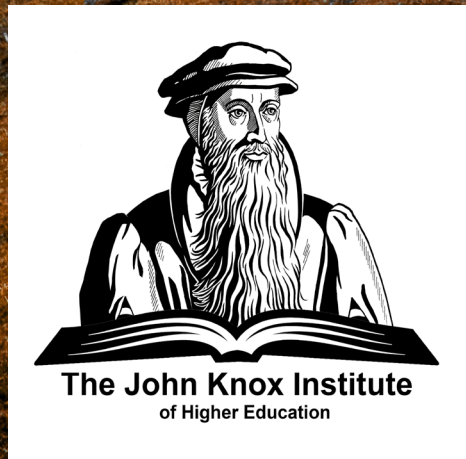


VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

PASTORAL THEOLOGY

by Rev. Harry Woods

LECTURE #8
Habits of Study, part 1



John Knox Institute of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Rev Harry Woods recently retired as minister of Kilmorack & Strathglass Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) in Beaulie, Scotland, after having served as a minister of the Gospel since 1982. He was the editor of the monthly denominational youth magazine, *The Explorer*; for eleven years and taught Apologetics and Pastoral Theology at the Free Church (Continuing) Seminary in Inverness for eighteen years. He is married to Mairi, and has three adult children and three grandchildren.

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Lecture #8

Habits of Study, part 1

We are going to begin looking at *Habits of Study*, and I want us to consider, in the first of these papers on study at some general habits. Notice, firstly, *The Importance of Study*, and then, *The Method of Study*, and then, we'll look at *Some General Habits Suggested*.

1. The Importance of Study

You cannot effectively function as a minister without diligent study. Failure to study, failure to prepare, failure to do reading will result in your ministry suffering. Your preaching will not improve. As you continue in the ministry, you will find that your sermons have little depth, that there is a sameness in your applications, and in your understanding, and all texts. It's possible you may get by on your natural abilities. There are some men who are good orators, but the fact is this—as one said, “They are like sound and fury, signifying nothing.” So, if we try and get by on our natural abilities, we will soon become stale in our preaching.

There are two main reasons why we may fail to study as we should. The first is slothfulness, and this is a great sin. I've dealt with this before, but it is one of those temptations in the ministry not to put in the work that we should; rather, to, as it were, laze throughout the day, just pass our time through the day, instead of getting down to deep, serious biblical study, theological study that will help us prepare for our sermons. With respect to slothfulness, it is important that we remember we are called of God, if indeed we are called. We are called of God. It's important to remember we have taken solemn ordination vows. This is not a light thing. Slothfulness in a minister is a great sin.

The other reason for lack of study is lack of discipline. Now we've tried to touch on that in *Time Management*, but very often we are unrealistic about the amount of work that we have to do. We find ourselves at the last minute scrabbling about, trying to get a sermon together. And this leads to chaos in our lives. We find that we are wasting time, not necessarily intentionally, but simply because of our lack of discipline in our lives, in our study, we have picked up bad habits that are interfering with our ability to study.

In study, reading, prayer, and meditation are needed. Study is not just about reading. Anybody can read just about any book—you can wade through it. But we have to acquire the habit of reading. Reading, for us, will become one of the most important things. So we have to acquire the habit. And we'll touch on that and how to read a book later on. This is a habit that's hard to achieve because, in our fast-moving age, in our generation where everything is videoed, or on screen, we

find that sitting down with a book and trying to plod through a book can be, for us, a difficult thing to do. But if we seek to achieve or acquire that habit of reading, prayer, and meditation, it will remove the sense of guilt that so often befalls the minister.

Well, so much for *The Importance of Study*.

2. The Method of Study

Think about *The Method of Study*, and I'm only dealing with general points here. A suggested method for a normal day's work might be an hour devotion before breakfast; five hours of study, in the study, with your books, preparing texts; perhaps two hours of visiting; and perhaps one and a half hours in the evening for reading and administration. Now, you might wonder, "Where have you plucked these times from?" You'll find them in Thomas Murphy's¹ *Pastoral Theology*, page 94. And they are just suggestions to give you an idea of some of the things that you have to do. You have to have a devotional aspect to your study. You have to have an academic aspect to your study. You have to have time for visiting. You have to have time for meditation. These are just some of the things that you will face in the ministry.

Some of the *general qualifications* with respect to study are as follows.

The study has to be a real detailed study. Being in the study is not the same as studying in the study. It's easy enough for us to go into the place where everybody thinks that all this diligent reading, and research, and preparation is going on, and simply be there reading a novel, or reading some administrative document that has been sent around. It's easy for us to waste time during the time of study with things that are not deep study themselves.

I would recommend that we study no more than five days a week. Don't do too much. Some men are in the study every day. Have a day off. Have a day off, you are working on the Lord's Day, so have a day off where you are not specifically giving yourself to your study for the preaching.

Again, if you have allocated, say, an hour for reading through a particular book, you should stick at that for the time that you've allocated, even if the reading is hard. You might be reading a systematic theology and find that it's difficult for you to grasp some point. Well, keep at it, and ensure that you get through it.

Again, with respect to some general qualifications, try and keep ahead in preparation. Sometimes men are so living from hand to mouth² in their preparation for preaching that they have no spare time. All their time seems to be spent in preparing for preaching. They may spend most of the week preparing for the Lord's Day. They may spend the whole of Wednesday preparing for the midweek meeting, and so on. It is useful to have some un-preached sermons up your sleeve, ready in case you have some interruption to your study time. If something happens in the congregation, it means that you do not have the usual time to study that you normally have.

But remember that Bible study is the first priority. The first priority, believe it or not, is not systematic theology, or pastoral theology, or any other theology. The priority must go to reading and studying the Word of God. The minister cannot afford to neglect the study of the Scriptures. They are absolutely essential to him, because the Scriptures will keep us in the right frame of mind for sermon preparation. The Scriptures will keep us from imbibing theology that is unbiblical. We will have a reference point. The Scripture will tell us whether this theology or that theology is right or wrong.

¹ Thomas Murphy (1823–1900) was an Irish American Presbyterian Minister, graduated Princeton Theological Seminary and was ordained at Frankford Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, where he served from 1849 to 1895. He is known for several works on history, biblical study, and practical theology.

² "Living from hand to mouth" in this context means being having no time for yourself, no time to rest.

If you are a linguist, then try and keep up with Hebrew and Greek. And if not, try and get used to looking up word studies on Greek and Hebrew words.

If your time is short, if you find that your schedule is such that you find it difficult to give a great deal of attention to reading, then make sure that you're reading the best authors, and make sure you're reading them thoroughly. It is better to read these best books than read all sorts of drivel in quantity.

Again, buy the books that you need. Don't clutter your library. Don't become a book snob in the ministry, so that you can say, "Oh, I have five hundred, I have a thousand books in my library." It matters not what you have in your library. What matters is what you have in your head. And so, buy books as you need them. If you have read a book and you don't think you'll use it again, give it away; pass it on to someone else.

3. Some General Habits Suggested

Well, as we conclude this introduction to *Habits of Study*, I want us to think of just *Some General Habits* that may help as you pursue study.

The first is this—allocate time to the subjects in your schedule. And what do I mean? Well, when you are studying for the ministry, you looked at things like Old Testament, New Testament, history, systematics, apologetics, pastoral, and so on. If you are continuing that kind of pattern, then make time in your schedule of study for covering these things. If not every week, certainly occasionally. You may concentrate on some specific subject for a time. You might find that you're drawn to systematic theology, perhaps even to a specific area. It might be the doctrine of God. It might be the person and work of Christ. Well, make these a subject that you can concentrate on. You may even specialize on something in your study for the church at large, so that you're not just preparing for the weekly services, but that you are doing a paper, perhaps to give to a theological seminar, or in a conference, or whatever. So allocate time for the various subjects in your schedule.

Well, these are *ten tips* to help you better manage your study.

1. Allocate time for things other than study. That might seem strange, because here I'm emphasizing what you should do in your study, but remember what we've said before. You have a life outside the study, and you should allocate time for things other than study. It might be recreation. It might be lighter reading. It might be some sport. It might be something like that.

2. Another tip is to allocate or apportion blocks of time for study. You know this from your school days. If you were in a school where you had a system of certain teaching periods, and so you studied for fifty minutes; perhaps on occasion, two blocks of fifty minutes. And that is a useful way of approaching your study in your own time. But you've got to be flexible. It may be that as you are reading through something, you are so gripped that you have to read on, and read into the next section. Don't simply close the book and forget something that was a blessing to you in what you were reading.

3. Again, a third tip, break large assignments into smaller manageable portions. If you are deciding that you are going to preach on the prophet Habakkuk, for example, don't preach through the whole of the book in a oner.³ Don't study it all in a oner. Break it up into those portions that you intend to preach on, and seek to study each portion day by day.

4. Again, get into the habit of doing the difficult work first, instead of wasting your time with trivia. That goes against the grain.⁴ We tend to go for the easy things. We tend to go for the

³ "Oner" in this context, means doing it all at once, all in the same time frame.

⁴ "Goes against the grain" is an idiom meaning to act contrary to personal beliefs or principles.

administration. We tend to go for the emails and the letters and such-like. Perhaps we should stand that on its head,⁵ and we should tackle the hard things first. Get them out of the way. We will always find time for those trivial matters.

5. Again, get your work done well in advance of the deadline. Don't be—unless there is some good reason for it—at the last moment finishing off your sermon preparation before you're going into the pulpit.

6. Set your priorities. Make lists, if necessary. You can mark those items on the list as “urgent,” “important,” or “not urgent,” and work through the list. Perhaps we're not very good at keeping lists, but lists are helpful to us, even if they're just jotted down on a scrap of paper.

7. Again, have a strategy for using any free time that you unexpectedly discover that you have. You may have set a time for preparing your sermon for Sunday morning, and you suddenly realize that you've been blessed, and you have the sermon finished perhaps an hour or half an hour before you expected to be finished. Well, use that half hour. Have something that you can pick up and read, or something you can pick up and do, and fill in those spaces wisely and usefully.

8. Need I say, that you should keep an appointments diary. And you should check your items each day before you go to bed so that you know what's coming up tomorrow. Don't be like some who just live, as it were, from hand to mouth, and they're never quite sure what they're going to do the next day. If you have taken a preaching engagement, make sure you put it in your diary. If you have to make a phone call that is urgent, then put it in your diary and make it that next day, and so on.

9. And use your to-do list, and mark it off when it's completed.

10. You can keep a year planner in your study and keep it up-to-date. In other words, you can look at a glance and see that you're preaching X number of times in April, and X number of times in May, and where you're preaching. And so, this will help you to prepare ahead.

3. Conserving the Fruit of Your Study

But we conclude our *General Habits of Study* lecture by asking, how can we conserve the fruit of our study? That's the problem that we often face in the ministry. We read books, we learn wonderful things in those books, and we promptly forget them. We need to learn to conserve the fruit of our studies.

We need to learn to read a book properly. That might seem a strange thing. There is a book that is called, *How to Read a Book*, a book by M. J. Adler.⁶ And it actually tells you how to read a book. You might think, “What on earth could that be about?” Well, for example, before you actually get into reading the matter of the book, look at the back cover—see what the blurb says. Look at the contents page, see what lies ahead—plan, as it were, as though you were reading a map of the book. Look at the index to see if there are certain things covered. Look at the section headings in each of the chapters. These are just a few of the things that we can learn when we learn how to read a book.

Learn how to take notes. You might take notes by highlighting the pages in the book that you are reading, with a highlighter. Let me just mention to you that you should note that only a yellow highlighter will allow the original text to be seen when photocopied. I haven't a clue where I got that from, but apparently that's quite true. So if you're going to highlight the book, use a yellow

⁵ “Stand that on its head” meaning do the reverse of what you might usually do.

⁶ Mortimer J. Adler (1902–2001) was an American philosopher, educator, author and lay theologian, best known for his book, *How to Read a Book*.

highlighter. Another thing is underlining, although that can be quite messy. Ideally, we should take notes, but not all of us have found that an easy thing to do. Many find that stopping to take notes actually disturbs and interrupts the flow of thought of the book that we are reading. But there they are—highlighting, underlining, and taking notes of the central ideals.

You see, once you have understood the book, once you have understood the commentary that you are reading, you actually don't need the flesh. You only need aids to memory. You just need to hold the bones of the skeleton in your mind, and you will be able to recall the arguments used and the applications made in the book. Taking notes is the way of making yourself seek out the bones. If you're looking to take notes, you don't want to underlining everything. You'll be looking for what's important, and by doing that, you will end up with a stripped-down version of the book that you are reading.

These are just some *General Habits of Study*, and God willing, we will look in our next lecture at some of the more specific *Habits of Study*. Thank you.