



Institute For Principle Studies

Commentary

Reflections on Reading

By Jenna R. Holliday

“The man who will not read has no advantage over the man who cannot read.” Attributed to Mark Twain, this quotation illustrates an important principle regarding reading: the technical ability to read does a person no good if he does not execute the ability. The capacity to read is an incredible gift, but it does not provide any benefit if it is not practiced.

Now readers, if you are anything like me, you probably have continual good intentions of reading, but how many of us actually turn the intentions into action? I know that I, at any given time, generally have a stack of at least five books on my bedside table, all of them “important” on my reading list, but none of them receiving the attention they deserve. Many of us are aware of the importance of serious reading, but we simply do not make the effort to practice the art of reading. Gene Veith puts it this way: “A growing problem is illiteracy—many people do not know how to read. A more severe problem, though, is ‘aliteracy’—a vast number of people know how to read but never do it”.¹

One major emphasis at IPS is encouraging people to start reading again—reading in the eager, profitable way that American society read at the time of our nation’s founding. Yes, it is true that Americans are “literate” in a strictly technical term, but in too many cases, only literate in the sense that, as Susan Wise Bauer puts it, “allows readers to absorb newspapers and Stephen King with ease,” rather than trained in how to “read seriously, how to *study*.”² This more serious approach to reading takes time, effort, and energy, but again as Bauer expresses, “reading is no harder (or easier) than it has ever been.”³ If you are anything like me, you probably complain, “I don’t have time to undertake serious reading like this!” It is true that our days are full, as we rush from one hectic season of life to the next, but it is equally true that we always manage to make time for the things we sincerely want to do. Often we think we cannot “fit it all in” in the available hours of the day. However, it is often a simple matter of priorities when it comes to what we “have time” for. What is truly important to us? What do we truly value? These are always the things that we will make time for, regardless of how rushed and hectic our lives become.

Of course, as Christians, the most important thing we can be doing is spending time in the Word of God. Secondly, however, I am convinced that one of the next most important things we can do is to set about a course of serious reading. Changing hearts and minds—the phrase that perhaps best sums up what IPS is all about—involves furthering education, and furthering education involves reading. After all, the best education is one that will, as Dorothy Sayers expressed it, “teach men

¹ Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Reading Between the Lines* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1990), p. 25.

² Susan Wise Bauer, *The Well-Educated Mind* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003), p. 18.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

how to learn for themselves; and whatever instruction fails to do this is effort spent in vain.” One of the Institute’s primary goals is to encourage Americans of all ages to fuel and develop a natural hunger for learning—and this goal is perhaps best accomplished by reading. Again quoting Gene Veith: “When we read, we cultivate a sustained attention span, an active imagination, a capacity for logical analysis and critical thinking, and a rich inner life.”⁴ The sheer impact of careful, thoughtful reading simply cannot be over-emphasized, especially in a culture that has largely abandoned any emphasis on such reading.

For those of us who are intimidated by the time commitment that a course of serious reading would take, consider this excerpt from John Piper:

Suppose you read slowly like I do—maybe about the same speed that you speak—200 words a minute. If you read fifteen minutes a day for one year (say just before supper, or just before bed), you will read 5,475 minutes in the year. Multiply that by 200 words a minute, and you get 1,095,000 words that you would read in a year. Now an average serious book might have about 360 words per page. So you would have read 3,041 pages in one year. That’s ten very substantial books. All in fifteen minutes a day.⁵

Numbers like this inspire me. Something that seems overwhelming becomes less daunting when it is broken down into reasonable (and reachable) goals. Concerned Americans, Americans who want to truly make a difference, should be setting goals to continue educating themselves and then sharing their knowledge with others. I would love to see every person I talk to at a conference or convention who is excited to learn more about what we are teaching begin to commit himself or herself to reading good books. This is perhaps one of the most effective means by which we can reach out to change hearts and minds.

Anyone who has taken an IPS class knows that we major on reading. I have personally seen many people become truly excited about reading the books we sell and opening a new world of knowledge to themselves. Realistically, I have to assume that sometimes the books we send home with attendees of our classes will go on a shelf and never be read, but it is my hope that we can and will encourage our audiences to expend the effort that it takes to actually read those books about which they initially have become so excited.

I urge myself as well as my readers to make a conscious effort, as 2009 draws to a close and 2010 is on the horizon, to become better readers, in a broad sense. Pick up that book that has been on your nightstand for three months. Choose a time that can become a dedicated reading time, whether it is every day, several times per week, or even just once every week. Consider what John Piper says about the “15 minutes a day” strategy. Remember that seemingly small efforts can reap considerable rewards in the larger scheme of things. Just as the mustard seed, the tiniest of all the seeds, grows into a giant of a tree, so even the outwardly small efforts of continuing your own education can and will blossom in your life in ways you might never have imagined.

⁴ Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Reading Between the Lines* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1990), p. xiv.

⁵ John Piper, *When I Don’t Desire God* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004), p. 129.