

The Practice of Personal Daily Devotions

In our day much emphasis is placed on keeping physically fit. Most of us have seen joggers along the road, running as hard as they could go—tongue hanging out of the mouth—sweating, panting, and plugging along. Some physical exercise is necessary and should be practiced on a regular basis, but the Bible says that spiritual exercise should be pursued even more rigorously. Time spent in prayer and Bible study and meditation and Scripture memorization will bring spiritual profit now, and will yield rich rewards throughout eternity. We read in 1 Timothy 4:8, “For bodily exercise profiteth little, but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.”

Every one of us needs to strive to stay in top spiritual condition through the discipline of daily devotional exercise. The absence of private daily devotions is the number one reason for backsliding among professing Christians. The practice of daily private devotions goes by several names—manna in the morning, the daily watch, the quiet time, daily devotions, individual worship—but regardless of what you call it, seeing that it becomes a regular practice is highly important.

1. The Need For Daily Nourishment

Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Gideon, Job, and David—all met God early in the morning.

Genesis 19:27 says, “And Abraham got up early in the morning to the place where he stood before the Lord.”

Genesis 28:18 says, “And Jacob rose up early in the morning” and consecrated an altar before God.

Exodus 34:4 says, “And Moses rose up early in the morning and went up to Mount Sinai” and the Lord descended and stood with him.

Job 1:5 says, “Job . . . rose up early in the morning and offered burnt offerings” and interceded for his children.

Psalms 5:3 says, “Oh Lord, in the morning will I direct my prayer to thee.”

Mark 1:35 says, “In the morning, rising up a great while before day, (Jesus) departed into a solitary place and . . . prayed.”

If Jesus (the eternal Son of God) felt the need to rise early and pray, who are we to carelessly neglect the important activity of getting alone with God and seeking His face at the beginning of each new day?

Some of the most noted Christian leaders down through the centuries urged the practice of “the morning watch.” Martin Luther said, “If I fail to spend time in devotions each morning, the devil seems to get the victory during the day.” John Wesley went to bed early, and then spent two hours in prayer and Bible study each morning, arising at 4:00 A.M. Oswald J. Smith said, “For over sixty years I have

observed the morning watch. Because I meet God in the morning, I often solve problems before I come to them. Without the morning watch, my work would be many times more difficult.”

Going without breakfast is a poor habit, but so is failure to have a spiritual breakfast each day. To find quiet moments with God each morning requires discipline, but it pays rich rewards.

Some people prefer their devotional period in the evening, like Isaac, who “went out into the field to meditate at the evening” (Genesis 24:63). It depends a great deal on one’s bodily constitution and on the individual’s job schedule. The man who works on “an evening shift” will likely have his devotional time closer to noon each day. The important thing **is to set a time, and then stick to that time every day**. All of us need time to refuel, to collect our thoughts, and to set the pace for the day.

The morning watch is indeed a very important activity. One unknown poet says:

We mutter, we sputter, we fume and we spurt;
We mumble and grumble, our feelings get hurt.
We can’t understand things, our vision grows dim;
When all that we need is a moment with Him.

God has promised to keep in perfect peace those whose minds are “stayed on” him (Isaiah 26:3).

2. The Agenda For the Quiet Hour

One organization publishes a small booklet entitled “*How to Plan a Daily Morning Watch*.” They call it “A Daily 7-Up” —suggesting that, at least for a start, five minutes for morning devotions may be too short, and ten minutes may be too long (and the young Christian will become discouraged). And so the writer recommends a seven-minute devotional period each day—for those who are just beginning the good habit of daily devotions. The first minute can be used for preparing the heart—thanking God for the night’s sleep, for sustaining us through the night, and for choosing to give us another day of life.

The opening prayer can be followed by carefully reading a portion of Scripture. It is a good idea to begin with the book of Mark, because Mark is a short, fast-moving account of the life and ministry of Jesus. (It is best not to begin with Genesis or Matthew—because Genesis is a long book and it is a long way through the Old Testament, and Matthew begins with many hard-to-pronounce names in the genealogy of Jesus.) After completing the reading of Mark, try moving on to John, the Acts, some of the Epistles, and then some of the Old Testament books.

The final few minutes (of a beginner’s devotional period) should be spent in prayer. For a start, it is wise to keep the devotional period short, but as the weeks progress, and the good habit is developed, you will want to allow a longer period of time for the daily quiet time. We want to examine some of the elements of the devotional period more carefully.

a) The quiet hour includes Bible reading.

The Bible is the major source of spiritual food. It is likened to milk (1 Peter 2:2), bread (Matthew 4:4), and meat (Hebrews 5:12). Jeremiah the prophet said, “Thy words were found and I did eat them” (Jeremiah 15:16).

It is important to develop a systematic plan for reading the Bible. At least a few times in life it is good to try and read the entire Bible through from cover to cover. If a person is a good reader, it is well to read five chapters each Sunday, and three chapters each week day—and in that way read entirely through the Bible in one year. There are other “reading guides” that are not as demanding, and yet helpful, in developing a pattern of Bible reading. Often it is more meaningful to read the Bible more slowly and very thoroughly, jotting down notes as you read. The daily quiet-time is not to be a mere mechanical reading of the Bible; it is concentrating on meaning and seeking to absorb spiritual truth.

It is very helpful to have a few good Bible study tools—a Bible dictionary, a concordance, and a Bible handbook. These are available in Christian bookstores and are sometimes available as used books at rescue mission stores and other similar places of business. Sometimes it will be of benefit to read the Bible text in a different translation, allowing the translation to serve as a kind of commentary on the passage you are reading.

b) The quiet time includes simple meditation.

The word “meditation” has a Latin root which means “to ponder” and “to weigh.” Meditation requires reflection and contemplation and study. To meditate means “to give careful thought to” a particular issue. Meditation has always been considered a central part of Christian devotion. Meditation is the activity of calling to mind, thinking things over, and “dwelling on” wholesome concepts.

To meditate effectively, silence is very important. And silence in this noisy world is more and more difficult to experience. The machines of industry, the wheels of business, and the vehicles of transportation are all noisy. Many people seem to prefer some kind of noise—a radio, a television, or a cassette tape playing just about all the time—but those things are not conducive to wholesome meditation.

Meditation is continuous reflection on the goodness of God, and on how His love for us should produce obedience in daily life. Meditation, in a sense, is like a hen sitting on eggs to keep them warm until they hatch. Meditation is thinking long and soberly about God’s love and redemption and guidance and healing and sovereignty, etc. It is easy to hear preaching, to participate in Bible study groups, to attend seminars—to mark our Bibles and fill out notebooks and file away cassette tapes—and then forget about what we have studied. We can go to meetings and listen to Bible teachers and write down notes—and then rush off to something else. We often fail to meditate—to ponder, to question, to reflect, and to apply. Whether we like it or not—it takes time to be holy; it takes time to digest the Word of God. Meditation is one of the keys which enables us to take what we learn and apply it in daily living.

c) The quiet time includes alert prayer.

If you once start reading the Bible on a regular basis, you will often find yourself breathing a prayer as you read. For example, if you are reading the verse in 1 Corinthians 13 where it says, “Love is not easily provoked”—and you remember the burning resentment you felt recently when someone crossed your path—it is natural to pause and pray. Confess your sin; ask God’s forgiveness; pray for deliverance; ask God not only to help you keep your mouth shut, but ask Him to dry up the very wells of resentment down inside your being.

And then, after God has spoken to our hearts through His Word, we should be ready to speak to Him in prayer. Our prayers should be specific, not just “Bless so-and-so.”

It is good to begin our prayer-time by confessing our own sins—acknowledging cheap motives, unlovely thoughts, and poor habits. Talk to God like you would to a trusted earthly father. Tell Him how much you love Him. Thank Him for what He has done. Lay out your needs before Him. Intercede for those who have special burdens. And ask the Lord to guide you throughout the day.

Remember that God does not yawn with boredom when we come to Him in prayer, and tell Him our concerns, and confess our foolishness, and ask honestly for His help. In Hebrews 4:16, we are instructed to “come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.” And in Philippians 4:6, we are told to “let your requests be made known unto God.” Our Heavenly Father wants us to pray.

Bible reading, careful meditation, and sincere prayer—these are major components of the daily quiet time which every Christian should practice.

3. Hindrances To Regular Daily Devotions

It is much easier to try and do other things than it is to spend time alone on a regular basis with the Lord. There are a number of hindrances to the practice of daily devotions.

a) Failure to concentrate can hinder.

In Colossians 4:2 we are instructed to “continue in prayer and watch in the same with thanksgiving.” The word “watch” means “to be alert” and “to guard against wandering thoughts.” Most of us discover that the mind tends to wander when we attempt the daily quiet time. Sometimes, while reading the Bible and praying, we find that our minds are thinking about all the other work we ought to be doing. There is grass to mow, a meal to prepare, a neighbor to help, a letter to write, wood to split, and dozens of other necessary things to do. This makes the devotional time seem to be a drudgery rather than the blessing it is intended to be.

We must keep several things in mind:

First, this is a spiritual battle and not necessarily a personal weakness. There is nothing wrong with you necessarily; it is just that the devil would love to ruin your devotional life.

Second, remind yourself, during those few minutes of private devotions, that you are in the presence of the Almighty, and that you are on holy ground.

Third, try reading and praying aloud if at all possible. Put forth a real effort to concentrate on what you are saying or reading. Sometimes, in order to keep wakeful and alert, it is helpful to get up and walk around even while praying.

Fourth, keep a prayer list; write down on a piece of paper the names of persons you want to remember, and concerns you want to lift up to God. A written prayer list helps keep one more alert during times of prayer.

b) Lack of discipline often hinders.

The greatest hindrance to a profitable period of daily devotions is often the lack of a plan—failure to establish a systematic approach. It is important to have a set time, and a quiet place for daily devotions. It requires discipline, and may require getting up somewhat earlier in the morning. But all it takes is a good Bible, an alarm clock that works, and a sincere desire to feed “the inner man” daily.

Discipline requires human resolve. It requires some effort on our part. When a young man asked George Mueller to pray for him because he had trouble getting up early each morning for a quiet time, Mueller said, “I’ll tell you what; if you will promise to get one leg out of bed, I will pray and ask the Lord to help you get the other leg out.” We must determine in our minds that this is something we are going to do—and then set out to do it.

c) The rush to serve can hinder.

Oswald Chambers says that the biggest enemy of devotion to Christ is service for Christ. When the disciple of Christ becomes excessively busy (even busy doing good things to please the Lord), it is easy to neglect our own inner life—and in this way we can become an easy prey to temptation.

Most of us are interested in doing helpful things for others—making scrapbooks, sending greeting cards, preparing a warm meal, singing Christmas carols, helping at a Rescue Mission, attending a prison service, cutting wood for one who is aged or sick, etc.—and such activities are an excellent way of serving the Lord Jesus faithfully. Those are the kinds of things we should be doing—but we must guard against neglecting our own personal daily devotional life while we are doing lots of good things.

We preach about the power of prayer. We tell people how much we need to be engaged in prayer. We say that “prayer changes things.” But it is easy for busy parents and teachers and farmers and factory workers and young people—to neglect time for personal prayer and Bible reading and quiet meditation. The Apostle Paul prayed that he might be “strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man” (Ephesians 3:16).

The Scriptures emphasize godly and pious living. One of the secrets of living a godly life is the diligent practice of daily devotions. It is impossible to live right without daily food. It doesn’t matter how faithfully and how diligently we attend Sunday morning church services, or how often we participate in

the ordinances of God's house, or how many Bible study seminars and family camps and Bible conferences and revival meetings we attend—if we fail to observe habits of regular prayer and systematic Bible study, our spiritual growth will be stunted and hampered.

The challenge to each of us is to make a pledge: "God helping me, I resolve to spend at least seven minutes each day in private personal devotions before God." Write that sentence on a sheet of paper. Underneath the statement, sign your name, and then set out to diligently practice the commitment.

A newspaper clipping many years ago gave some helpful advice on how to find time to read a book. These same suggestions apply to reading the Bible:

- 1) Talk less.
- 2) Place a book under your pillow at night; if you can't sleep, read.
- 3) Wake up 15 minutes earlier in the morning, and read.
- 4) Have a good book ready when you are to meet unpunctual people.
- 5) Take along your own good book when going to the dentist or doctor. Why read their old magazines?
- 6) Never go on a journey without a book; you may have unexpected free time.

The habit of reading needs to be developed with painstaking earnestness, especially in these days when multitudes waste time on frivolous entertainments such as watching television, looking at videos, and playing with computers. Unbelievers seek thrills from the pleasures of the world. By way of contrast, followers of Christ are nourished by desiring the pure milk of the Word of God (1 Peter 2:2).

The practice of observing regular daily devotions, if it is done in the right spirit, will—more than any other habit we can attain—make us more nearly what we ought to be in every way. We will be better persons. We will face the day with a greater amount of confidence. We will have the satisfaction of knowing that we gave God first place. Generally speaking, we will just feel better all over. A day that begins with a quiet time will generally continue with a more peaceful atmosphere.

-Harold S. Martin

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