

You Pick The Sermon: What Are Practical Ways I Can Stay Devoted To God Through My Week?

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Psalm 119:97-105; Hebrews 5:7-6:3; Luke 8:19-21

Today's final Scripture reading comes from the gospel of Luke, chapter 8, verses 19-21. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy Word. "Now Jesus' mother and brothers came to see him, but they were not able to get near him because of the crowd. Someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you." He replied, "My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice.""

Blaise Pascal, one of the world's greatest Christian thinkers, said, "The only thing which consoles us from our miseries is diversion, and yet diversion is the greatest of our miseries. For distraction hinders us from self-reflection. Self-reflection brings a state of weariness, and this weariness would spur us to seek a more solid means of escaping from it. But diversion amuses us, and leads us unconsciously to death."

Diversion amuses us. Pascal gets us, doesn't he? Whether it's Donald Trump's run for president, the Kardashians, or the never-ending news cycle, there is plenty to distract us. While we were at workcamp, Facebook blew up about a dead lion! Cable TV and sporting events and the best-selling novel list, you name it. Pascal knew distraction keeps us from thinking about the big things – about our lives. About God. About how desperately we need Him. Distractions allow us to flee from God, to think about anything else besides our own problems.

Pascal got modern culture. The only surprising thing is that he died in 1662. He was three hundred years too early for cell phones and computers and TV screens. But it's been true for as long as humans have been alive – unless we make a conscious effort, unless we determine to die to ourselves and live for Jesus Christ, we will always hunt for ways to distract ourselves from God, to avoid our guilt before Him and our need for Him.

The great news is, God is here, God is at work, and God does not want us to remain in sin and guilt and shame. Most of us here have claimed the promise of Jesus Christ. We have faith in Him, we believe in what He did, we trust that He is working in our lives, and we want Him to be the center of our existence. God has moved in us so that our hearts desire Him. The problem is, the world keeps getting in the way! So today's You Pick The Sermon topic is perfect: what are practical ways I can stay devoted to God through my week? We're going to explore that together tonight and see how we might keep our eyes on Jesus so as to not be so constantly distracted.

Our passage from Hebrews tonight shows that distraction is not just a problem for us, or even for Blaise Pascal 350 years ago. It's an eternal problem. The author tells his listeners, I've got so much to share with you, but you're just not ready yet! He says, you ought to be teachers by now, but you haven't learned the basics...they are still just infants who don't understand what it means to be righteous and to know good from evil. Some issues he says are foundational, issues like baptism and eternal judgment, we don't have a solid grasp about yet!

Hebrews asks us to be moving forward in faith, not backwards. He wants us to move on to solid food, he calls it. He's ready to start serving steak! But he can't serve steak to a toddler, to someone who's too distracted to learn the basics of salvation and repentance. He's harsh, but he's doing the job of a good coach. A good coach compliments you when you do well, but he also motivates you to do better, to push past your limits and what you think you can accomplish. If we work to be devoted to God, we will strengthen our spiritual muscles and be prepared for the challenges and discipline God has ahead for us.

So what does that devotion look like? Let's look at what Jesus said about it. In Luke's gospel, Jesus says, "My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice." He is kin to anyone who pays attention to God's word and actually carries it out. So when we're looking for practical devotion to God, it's going to involve spiritual discipline and understanding, and it's going to go beyond that to real-life application. We're going to actively avoid certain things and actively pursue others.

Then from Psalm 119 tonight, we have elements of practical devotion to God. First, the psalmist shouts, "Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long. Your commands make me wiser than my enemies, for they are ever with me." Practical devotion will lead us to read and think about God's Word all day long. Then he states, "I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes." There's that word meditation again. It means deep prayer and contemplation. Practical devotion is going to lead us to pray over God's Word.

There's also a circle of righteousness between obedience and understanding. The psalmist has more understanding than the elders because he obeys God's commands. At the same time, the understanding he gains from God's law leads him to obey. Obedience leads to understanding leads to greater obedience and greater understanding. Practical devotion is going to lead us into this circle of righteousness.

So with all these things in mind, let's get to the nitty-gritty. Now I'm going to preface the rest of my comments with a caveat – I'm not giving you absolutes for what you must do. I'm giving you my best suggestions. Not all of them may work for you. They are things that work for me and work for others that I respect. You might not be able to do them all the way I do, but you can do something like them. You'll find all of them listed for you in the bulletin.

The first and most important step in our devotion to God is devotion to God's Word. That is where His declarations and actions over the centuries are recorded and where we turn to confirm everything we know about Him. I'd go so far as to say that you can't be devoted to God and not to His Word. No matter how you approach it, God's Word needs to be part of your life every day in some fashion. It directs our thoughts, our actions, our prayers – everything.

The best way to study the Bible is to read the Bible. You need one you can read easily and come back to daily. I've used the New International Version for years, and it's great. The English Standard Version is good too. And if you aren't a great reader, there's no shame in it. The New Living Translation is really good for making the text simpler to understand. I would avoid the King James or older translations that are hard to understand because they won't draw you back on a daily basis. If you spend a lot of time driving, there are great audio Bibles as well.

Once you find the best translation, there's a little more work to do. Pick up a Bible that has extensive study notes to help you. A study Bible explains unfamiliar terms like we talked about last week. It will help you understand the background of passages that are complex or require knowledge of ancient culture to understand. They are more expensive, but it's worth it to understand God's Word. The NIV Study Bible is great, and so is the Reformation Study Bible. I am telling you right now that if you are willing to get a good Bible, I will go with you to Barnes and Noble or whatever bookstore you like and help you choose one that's right for you.

Once we're in God's Word, we're going to want to pray for God's direction, guidance, and leading. Many of you are uncomfortable praying. It's hard. You don't know what to say. You've told me so. So maybe you bring up people who are sick or in trouble, and that's it. But there's so much more we can talk to God about. Prayer is also about listening to God and making time to hear from Him.

The best thing I have ever done is prayed God's Word back to God. God's Word inspires prayer. There's a book by Kenneth Boa called *Handbook to Prayer*. It is the best book I have ever used to lead me into prayer. It has a 90 day cycle of prayers to use where you pray through Scripture for all kinds of things. Ken Boa has tweaked the Scripture just slightly so that when you pray it, it's directly about us and our relationship with God. It's a little pricey -- \$25 for a hard copy and \$10 for your Kindle. But for your eternal relationship with God, it is nothing. Spend the money and get it. If you buy a hard copy and don't like it, I will buy it back from you. I'm serious. It's that good, and your prayer relationship with God is that important. It will also help you start to know how to pray so you can pray effectively on your own.

Now you have your Bible and you're praying over God's Word and God's direction for your life, for God's will to be done...but what should you be reading in the Bible? There are tons of Bible reading plans out there, and many study Bibles include them. But frankly, most of us need something simple and easy to follow. That's where devotionals come in handy.

Some Bibles have devotional thoughts in them, but they don't give you a clear plan to read the Bible. I would strongly suggest Table Talk, which is a daily devotional printed by Ligonier Ministries. Folks who have been in our Bible studies have seen Ligonier studies and they know they're good. They will get you in the Word on a daily basis. I have my own Bible reading plan, but I still read Table Talk's articles that really help me grow in faith.

When you're into the Bible, you're going to have a fuller and richer understanding of all that God has done throughout history. The hard thing is keeping our heads around what God is doing right now in the midst of the modern world. I'm going to make two suggestions for you. The first is *WORLD Magazine*. It's a weekly publication like Time or Newsweek, only explicitly from a Christian worldview, written by folks in the Presbyterian Church in America. (Our denomination regularly shares pastors with them.) Why is WORLD important? It's because we see the news through the lens of the press, which sells us sensational stories to keep us buying what they're selling. World Magazine talks about the news, the arts, culture, sports, everything – but always keeping God directly in sight. In over ten years, I've finished every issue, even articles that weren't on things that really interested me. It's that good.

The other current events piece I regularly watch for is *The Briefing* by Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. It's a short daily podcast on the Internet. Mohler discusses daily events from a biblical perspective. He's really intelligent, but he makes the issues understandable to everyone, and his commentary is always centered on the Word of God. If you want to be thinking Christianly about topics from health care to marriage and everything in-between, it's worth your time to listen to *The Briefing*. If you don't like to listen or don't have time, they print a transcript every day too.

Those are all things that will promote your spiritual understanding and your ability to know and love and relate to God better. But we said it's a circle – understanding should lead to obedience which will lead back to greater understanding and greater obedience. To stay devoted to God, you need to *plan* obedience.

Now that doesn't mean that we don't prepare to be obedient all the time. We never know when we might be tempted by some sin that could lure us in, and we have to be vigilant in growing in grace, love, kindness, and self-control to avoid those things. But obedience to God isn't just merely *not* doing things God doesn't like. It's actively planning to do those things that God loves and commands us to do. Because if we don't plan, we won't do it, plain and simple.

Part of the vigilance of obedience in today's society is monitoring how much time we spend behind a screen. God made us to be relational beings – we are made to relate to God and relate to one another. I love media, and it gives us insights into people we'd never meet, stories we'd never hear, worlds within our own world we could never explore otherwise. But you can't have a relationship with a screen. Even if nothing you watch or play is offensive to God, it's still an illusionary world. We can learn from it, but we also need to learn to limit it. I've actually just bought a program that limits how much time I can spend online. Maybe you need that; maybe you don't. But do whatever you need to do to limit your time distracted away from active obedience to God. Coming back from this mission trip with the kids, I hopped on Facebook and I realized, what a bunch of garbage! But if I don't intentionally limit my exposure, I'll hop right back into it.

So what does active, obedient devotion look like? There are two parts I'll talk about tonight – service and sharing. The first is regular participation in mission specifically on behalf of Christ. Maybe it's visiting someone like our friend Jean Plonkey once a month, or helping at a local food bank like we'll be doing down at Military Avenue later this month, or driving folks to doctors' appointments or cooking meals for neighbors down the street with a newborn. It really doesn't matter what, but it's planned obedience to God's call to care for the least, the last, the lost, the needy, and the forgotten. It should not just be money but active participation. Money is needed, but obedience goes beyond funding ministry to doing ministry. It doesn't have to look any one particular way, but it comes from our devotion to Christ.

Sharing is the part of devotion where we are working on someone for Christ. We're asking God in prayer, "Who are you leading me to lead to You?" We're building relationships not just because someone has the same interests we do, though it might start there; we're building relationships specifically because God loves the people that we meet everyday, and someone you know is someone God wants to bring into His Kingdom through you.

The beauty of active obedience is that it leads to greater understanding. It's one thing to read that God works to change people's hearts. It's another thing entirely to see it happen in person. The beauty of this last week with the three young men who went to work camp was seeing how God moves in the midst of our feeble attempts at obedience. We'll tell you more about work camp in a few weeks, but much of the time, we got to be a part of what God was already doing. Young teens were able to see in little ways how their work made a difference for the Kingdom of God. Seeing God's promise in action makes God's Word come alive, and we understand more of God's heart for us.

In your bulletin, I've listed some resources that can help you keep your heart and mind on Christ throughout your days. There are places listed where you can find worship music, what stations typically play contemporary Christian songs. I've listed organizations that can help you deepen your faith through greater study of God and His Word. I'm not going to talk about those specifically, but there is a wealth of great material out there for anyone who wants it.

It may seem overwhelming. You might think, "Did I commit to all this when I became a Christian?" I don't want you to think of it as a burden but a blessing. God cares for you so much and He wants you to know Him and to experience His love for you. Devotion is less about tasks to accomplish and more about finding out what you were made for.

When you realize that you were made to be this, that you were made to be a child of God, that you were made to experience love neverending, devotion becomes natural. Not easy, because we are still sinners who are not fully perfected. But natural in that we long for more time with Him. Natural in that more and more of the things of this world become less important as you spend more and more time with Him. Seek understanding of the Lord and obedience to His ways, and you will become devoted to Him.