

Communing with God

If you believe statistics, less than 30% of Christians will read their Bibles outside of church. And although statistics are unreliable, most Christians will report difficulty or trouble with praying and meditating on Scripture. If we did an informal poll, and asked all the Christians in this room to speak on how frequently they met with God in private this last week, and how satisfying the experience was, we might have some disappointing results.

From when we are new Christians, we become aware that we should spend time alone with God. Sometimes we hear it in sermons, sometimes it is because we are disciplined, and often we just seem to know that we should meet with God by praying and reading the Word. But very often, we are unsure of exactly how we are to do this.

Most Christians try by just reading the Bible somewhere, and for some reason, they choose books like Hebrews, Revelation or the visions of Ezekiel to begin with. Once they are quite puzzled by what they have read, they try to pray. Some do better than others, but most find their minds wandering, their thoughts distracted, and the whole experience rather unsatisfying. To be frank, many Christians get up from their quiet time feeling guiltier, not less. And their guilt tends to drive them away from consistently, ideally daily, meeting with the Lord.

On top of all that, a lot of myths have grown up around the notion of the quiet time. Rather like unspoken expectations, or cultural customs, all sorts of things that are not found in Scripture become Law, like the time of day, the frequency, the length, the content, and before you know it, we are carrying a huge burden of expectations that really aren't found in the Bible at all.

What exactly does God want from us when it comes to private prayer? What should the quiet time be? How should we go about it? I want to look at this topic this morning, by considering various Scriptures, and hopefully putting some tools into your hands. Before we look at the *how* of devotions, I want to firstly strip away three myths regarding the quiet time. I want us to clear away the wrong, so we can focus on what is right.

Myth # 1 The Quiet Time Feels Completely Different to Corporate Worship.

There is an idea out there, and I'm not sure why it seems so believable to us. It goes like this: the way I address God, and adore God and praise God in the assembly of believers is totally different to the way I adore and praise God in private. In the assembly, it's exalted, but in private, it's intimate, almost romantic. In the assembly, it's reverent and joyful, but in private it's familiar and friendly.

Now it is one thing to say that there is a difference. Of course there is: one is public, one is private. One is the gathered assembly, the other is a personal encounter and so it is obvious that there will be differences. In church we say, "we praise you" "give us" "forgive us" and in private you will say, "I praise you" "forgive me" "grant me".

It is obvious that when speaking to the Lord in private, you will speak to Him about matters, some of which you wouldn't share in the public assembly. You will confess your own sins. You will give thanks for His blessings to you. You will ask Him for things particular to your life and you will adore Him for His person, as you have come to know it.

Obviously the focus is more personal, and in that sense it is different. But should it be completely different in character? Is God like a King when we meet in public, but like a boyfriend when we

meet him alone? Is God like a loving Father when we meet in public, but like a best pal when we meet Him in secret? No. God is who and what He is whether we adore Him in public, or whether we adore Him in private. God is all that He is all the time. He is always majestic, holy, loving. The psalms that we use in public were written by David in private.

If the kind of love, and the kind of joy, and the kind of reverence that we have for God in corporate worship is totally different to the kind we have in private worship, something is wrong. We are then almost worshipping different gods in public and in private.

Part of what corporate worship does is to train and teach us how we should respond to God. Just like children learn their manners by being in the presence of adults addressing other adults, so we all learn how to love and rejoice and revere our God in and through the worship of the church. Your expectation for meeting God and adoring God in the assembly should be about the same as your expectation in meeting Him in private. That's why you can find the pattern for private worship in corporate worship. What do we do in corporate worship? We read the Bible; we meditate on it, and respond to God in adoration, in song and prayer. When you meet with God, that's exactly what you do: meditate on what God has revealed about Himself, and respond to Him in adoration in prayer and song.

Myth #2 A Successful Quiet Time Produces Ecstatic Feelings.

It is true that the more we learn to worship God, the more satisfying and joyful it becomes. However, while worshipping God is deeply satisfying, and brings great joy, meeting with God is not about getting those feelings. To go looking for the feelings is to make the feeling the goal, and God the means. We do not worship an ecstatic feeling, and use thoughts about God to get us there. We worship God, regardless of how high or low our feelings might be on particular days.

Many people judge their times of worship by how intense their feelings were, and the more intense they were, the more they feel the quiet time was 'successful'. If the feelings were not, they judge it to be a failure.

Now imagine a husband and wife who have been married for ten years, go out for a date. They enjoy the time being alone together, catching up, reminiscing about the past, talking about the future, and just expressing their appreciation and admiration for each other. They go home, and the husband sits down and evaluates the evening. He asks himself, did I feel dizzy tonight? Did I feel short of breath and giddy? Did I get butterflies in my stomach and sweaty palms? Did the world seem to be spinning? No. Well, another failed date. Wouldn't that be ridiculous? Of course, he may have had those sensations when he first began dating his wife, just as a new convert's appetite for Scripture and experiences are often near ecstatic. But the man has a deeper, more settled, stronger love for his wife now, and the presence of ecstatic feelings is not the point at all.

When you are in love, you are not fascinated by how much you love. You are fascinated by how loveable the person is. Nor should it be in our quiet times. I agree that worshipping God should not leave us stone cold or indifferent. And I agree that some times of worship will be thrilling. Some will be calmer. But no time of meeting with God should be judged on how intensely you felt certain feelings. It should always be judged on how clearly you saw God, and how you responded to Him.

Myth # 3 Having a Daily Quiet Time is a New Testament Law.

Worshipping God is not a law, but a gracious privilege. As people who like rules to give us

structure, and worse, to give us an exam to see if we have passed, we like to create New Testament rules. So let me get it out the way. The New Testament and the Old does not tell you to have a quiet time, as many think of it today. It does tell you plenty of times to pray, and to pray in secret, to meditate on Scripture, to give thanks, and to worship God. But it doesn't prescribe a daily morning time with your Bible, notebook and cup of coffee. Most believers in history haven't had the privilege of holding an entire Bible in their hands. In that sense, a Christian is not under some obligation to read through the Bible in a year, and pray through a list 365 days a year.

We do not have to be the sort of believers who are chained to a narrow list of do's and don'ts. We seek to meet with God alone not because there is a law saying we have to, but because by grace, we get to! It is an enormous privilege to meet with God, and it is love and delight that draws us.

Picture a marriage counsellor doing pre-marital counselling with an engaged couple. He says to the husband-to-be, "In a few weeks, you get to spend quality time with her every day!"

And the man says, "Do I have to?"

And the counsellor replies, "Well, it's not really like that. You get to!"

To which the young man responds, "But what will happen to me if I don't?" Well, we'll look at that young man and wonder about the health of the relationship. When we love someone, the obligation to spend time with them is a delightful duty.

So, if you miss a quiet time, you have not broken a commandment, you have missed an opportunity. And in a healthy, loving relationship, when you miss an opportunity to be with the Person you love, you do not go into a guilty corner to sulk, you simply take the next opportunity to be with that Person. We do not have to meet with God out of guilt, but because of grace. He welcomes us, and calls us.

So, three myths: that the quiet time must be of a completely different character to corporate worship, that it must always produce ecstatic feelings, and that we are divinely commanded to read our Bibles and prayer every morning.

With that out the way, we want to ask, what are our devotions supposed to be? What should we be looking to do? I take it for granted Christian, that you do want to meet with God alone. What then, are we supposed to do, and how are we supposed to do it?

I want you to see some of the answer in Psalm 63.

Psalm 63:1-8 *Psalm 63:1 A Psalm of David when he was in the wilderness of Judah. O God, You are my God; Early will I seek You; My soul thirsts for You; My flesh longs for You In a dry and thirsty land Where there is no water. ² So I have looked for You in the sanctuary, To see Your power and Your glory. ³ Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, My lips shall praise You. ⁴ Thus I will bless You while I live; I will lift up my hands in Your name. ⁵ My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness, And my mouth shall praise You with joyful lips. ⁶ When I remember You on my bed, I meditate on You in the night watches. ⁷ Because You have been my help, Therefore in the shadow of Your wings I will rejoice. ⁸ My soul follows close behind You; Your right hand upholds me.*

What is David doing in this psalm? Is he asking God for a list of things? Is he pleading for protection and provision and deliverance from calamities? Look at what he says he is doing in verses 3-5. He is praising. He is blessing. He is lifting up his hands. He is satisfied. He is praising with joy. Verse 6 clearly describes private worship. He is on his bed, he is meditating at night – what is he doing when he does that? What is one word to describe what David is doing? Adoration.

I have already said that we should not see a massive difference between our time with God in private and our time with Him together on Sunday. So let me take it then to the logical conclusion: The goal of meeting God alone each day is to worship Him. It is to adore him.

Worship is about knowing and loving God. That's the purpose of meeting with God. It is not to pray through a list for the umpteenth time. It is not to superstitiously protect your day from calamities. It is not to merely confess your sins, and ask for protection and provision over your loved ones. It is to know and love God.

If you experience some coldness or shallowness in your walk with God, let me ask, are you seeing your devotions/quiet time as a time to adore God? If you use it to read some Scriptural truth, and then rattle off some requests, it won't be long until your walk with God seems lonely and God does not seem real. What human relationship could survive that? Could a friendship survive if every time you got together, you just read something privately, and then asked your friend to do twenty or thirty things for you? Even if you had the kindest friend in the world, I doubt you would feel any closer to that person if that's all you did.

But this is what our quiet times are supposed to be: private times of adoring God. It is your opportunity to admire, and respond. I think we would have to say, that our age is not an age of adoration. We are very busy, very rushed, filled with activities, but we are not often admirers of God. One symptom of this shows up in our prayers. Have you ever prayed for more than two or three minutes without asking God for anything? Can you pray to God where all you talk to God about is God?

I think one of the reasons prayer meetings are so poorly attended is because we are so weak at adoration. No one likes to just rattle off requests for an hour, but we are not well-trained and well-exercised when it comes to adoration, so we just don't know what to say.

But it does not have to be that way. Christ's work on our behalf has opened the way for us to have close communion with God. The way is open for us to approach God, know Him and adore Him.

So how should we go about it? Let me suggest five ways to help you grow in frequent adoration of God.

I. Set some time apart, and discipline yourself to keep and protect that time.

David says that he meditated here in the night watched

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Psalm 55:17 ¹⁷ *Evening and morning and at noon I will pray, and cry aloud, And He shall hear my voice.*

Mark 1:35 ³⁵ *Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed.*

And Jesus Himself told us

Matthew 6:6 ⁶ *"But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.*

The point is, to adore God in private, you need time, and you need to discipline yourself to make time in a day, protect the time from interruptions and distractions, so that you can truly focus on God and enjoy Him. There is no law that it must be in the morning, though it's probably the time when most of us are not exhausted from the day, and we can spend time with God. If you are working a job that does not allow that, or if you have infants or little children that make it hard to do

that, try to carve out another time in the day. Switch off the phones, unplug, get in a place where you can't be distracted, and give yourself enough time. There is no requirement that it be for an hour or half an hour. If you were to spend time with someone you love, you would simply want enough time to not be rushed, and a place where you are not continually distracted. Jesus chose a solitary place, and with good reason. That's why while it's fine to pray in the car, or when you're walking, I don't know how well you can adore God when you're doing several other things at the same time. Find a time that works, find a place that works. And change those times and places when they no longer work. The point is, you want to be free to focus on and admire God.

II. Come to God through Jesus Christ

The reason we can know God at all, is because of the gospel. A Moslem, a Hindu, a Jew, or an unbeliever could sit down with the Bible, read it, and get some truths out of it. But that is not adoring God and knowing Him. To know and adore God is to come to Him through the way God has appointed. We can only come to God through the Person and work of Jesus Christ, mediated to us by the Holy Spirit. That's why our first emotion in coming to God might be one of a feeling of unworthiness. How can we come before the Creator, who is holy? How can we, who are just dust, speak to Him? But Jesus Christ turns that unworthiness, because of our "creatureliness", and our sinfulness, into boldness. Jesus is our Mediator. Jesus is the God-Man, who represents us. It is His righteousness that the Father sees on us, and it is because of Him that we can approach.

III. Seek to Know God as a Person

Notice whom David is seeking:

O God, You are my God; Early will I seek You; My soul thirsts for You; My flesh longs for You In a dry and thirsty land Where there is no water. ² So I have looked for You in the sanctuary, To see Your power and Your glory.

We've already said that we do not go to the quiet time looking for a particular emotion. We also don't go looking for information or ideas or religious facts. We don't just read to gather knowledge. For that matter, if all we do in our devotions is ask for things, then we are coming to Him to get things. We are not coming to Him for Him, but we are coming to Him for what He can give us.

God reveals Himself to the hearts and minds of His children who are seeking Him. God is to be known, not as a set of facts, but as a Person. In fact, any time you try to know someone without knowing them as a Person, in some ways, you degrade them. How would you feel about someone who got to know you by going through your Facebook profile, reading your private emails, hacking into your voicemail and SMSes, and hiring a private detective to track your movements? That's not knowing a person, it's actually dehumanizing. Healthy marriages include some face-to-face time, where we are alone with the other person, simply speaking to them, getting to know them.

So it is when we come to God's Word, and treat it like some disconnected information. It is not enough to just read the Bible, as if that by itself will cause adoration. Adoration means seeking a Person in the pages. Make up your mind to use the time you set apart to do nothing less than seek to know and adore God Himself.

You set aside the time. You come to God through the Person and work of Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. You come seeking to know and adore the Person of God. That leads to the fourth approach:

IV. Respond to the Person and Work of God That You See in Scripture.

In Psalm 63, David is not making things up, and trying to think of nice things to say about God. Notice he is responding to things about God.

Psalm 63:2-3 *So I have looked for You in the sanctuary, To see Your power and Your glory. ³ Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, My lips shall praise You.*

Worship is always a response. We don't come up with our own worship. God shows us Himself in the Bible. When we see who he is, and think about it, we will admire Him. Not because we have to, responding to things but because He is admirable. We then reflect back to Him, our admiration is in prayer. We come to the Word, seeking to know and love and adore God for His attributes, His work or His Word.

So here is a simple approach. You open the Scriptures and you find a Scripture that reveals some aspect of God's character or work. The easiest, and simplest place to look is the Psalms, or the Gospels. All Scripture reveals God, but some Scriptures lead us to adoration in a more straightforward way.

So let me suggest something that may sound strange. I am not sure that Bible-reading programmes are what you need if you want to adore God. It is fine and well to use Bible-reading programmes to read through the Bible. I think we should do that. But when you have set aside time to know God for who He is. Sometimes reading the lists on the book of Numbers, or the size of the curtains in the Tabernacle, or the judgement of Edom may not be that helpful. Turn to passage you know reveal some aspect of God's Person or work.

Read it carefully. Don't look for some hidden meaning. Simply read to understand. What does it say about God? What is he like? What can He do? Very often, the Scripture will give some kind of image or analogy to help you understand God's person or work.

David also uses two images that bring out what God is like:

Psalm 63:1 *My soul thirsts for You; My flesh longs for You In a dry and thirsty land Where there is no water.*
Psalm 63:5 *My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness, And my mouth shall praise You with joyful lips.*

What do those images do in helping David, and us, understand what it means to love God ? Seeking and finding God is like quenching a mighty thirst. Knowing God is like wellness, fullness. You do not have to try to imagine God when you pray to Him. He has given you images, which when you unpack, reveal the truth about God, which you respond to.

As we see who He is, and possibly even reflect on how we have seen His nature or work come to bear on our lives, we respond with admiration. Turn your admiration for what you see, into prayer. Respond to God.

David did just that:

Psalm 63:3-7 *Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, **My lips shall praise You.** ⁴ **Thus I will bless You while I live; I will lift up my hands in Your name.** ⁵ *My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness, **And my mouth shall praise You with joyful lips.** ⁶ *When I remember You on my bed, I meditate on You in the night watches. ⁷ Because You have been my help, **Therefore in the shadow of Your wings I will rejoice.*****

We respond to God in adoration, admiration, thanksgiving. At some point, there will probably be some confession, and even requests for grace to love better, to be more pleasing to God. But when you are adoring God, why would we want to interrupt that with requests? And then, move on, and read more, and reflect more.

And then perhaps, find a hymn that deals with the attribute or work of God you've looked at, and read it out loud, or sing it. The more we get used to simply adoring, the more natural it becomes. The more relish we have for it, motivating us to be disciplined to keep to that time. But above all, we give God glory, we love Him, our lives are perfumed with worship, with adoration for God.

Your quiet time is not the be-all and end-all of your Christian life. But it is very important that you worship God in secret as well as in public. So set aside and protect that time. Come to the Triune God in the Person and work of Jesus. Seek God, the Person. Seek Him in the Scripture, looking for His person and work, considering it, responding with admiration and adoration in prayer and song.

The great feast that David experienced awaits you. All the resources to seek and know God have been made available to you. Through Christ the way is open to you. The Father invites you. The Spirit will enable you. So come, as the hymn says, come let us adore Him.
