

## Devoted to Prayer

F- Free and Formed- The difference between structured and unstructured prayer

Being devoted to prayer will mean that what you say in your times of prayer will often be free and unstructured, and often be formed and structured. If you are only free in your prayers you will probably become shallow and trite. If you are only formed in your prayers, you will probably become mechanical and hollow. Both ways of praying are important. Not either-or, but both-and.

By free I mean you will regularly feel like pouring out your soul to God and you will do it. You will not want any script or guidelines or lists or books. You will have so many needs that they tumble out freely without any preset form. This is good. Without this it is doubtful that we have any true relation with Christ at all. Can you really imagine a marriage or friendship where all the communication read from lists or books, or spoken only in memorized texts. That would be artificial in the extreme.

On the other hand, I plead with you not to think you are so spiritually deep or resourceful or rich or disciplined that you can do without the help of forms. I have in mind four kinds of forms that I hope you all make use of:

1. The Bible- Pray the Bible. Pray Biblical prayers. Memorize it and pray it often.
  - The Lord's Prayer- As you pray it put each phrase in your own words and apply it to the people you are burdened about. (Luke 11:2-4)
  - The commands of the Bible- "Help me - help my family, my friends, those in authority over me, our missionaries to love you, O God, with all my heart and all my soul and all my strength" (Matthew 22:37).
  - The promises of the Bible- "O Lord, take all the authority that is yours in heaven and on earth and make our missionaries feel the sweetness of the promise that you will be with them to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).
  - The warnings of the Bible- "O Lord, grant me to fight against lust with the kind of urgency that you taught when you said, gouge out your eye and got to heaven rather than leave it good and go to hell" (Matthew 18:9).
2. Lists- I have in mind lists of people to pray for and lists of needs to pray about. If you can remember all the people and needs you should be praying for without a list, you are God. I must have lists, some in my head and some on paper. Keep some kind of prayer folder or notebook or files in your handheld computer. Remember I am only talking about the second half of this pair: freedom and form. Don't forget the value of freedom. It is both-and, not either-or.
3. Books- Pray through books like *Operation World* - a different country, and the cause of Christ in it, every day or two. What a powerful way to get a globe-sized heart and vision of God's supremacy! Pray through a book like *Extreme Devotion*—a one-page glimpse into the suffering, persecuted church for every day of the year. Take John Piper's book, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, and pray through the 36 things he lists that the early church prayed for each other. Take *The Valley of Vision*, a book of Puritan prayers, and pray what great saints of the past have prayed.
4. Patterns- Develop patterns of prayer that give you some guidance of what do first and second and third when you get down on your knees. Without some form or pattern my mind tends to wander or I tend to freeze and go nowhere.
  - The Lord's Prayer
  - Concentric circles starting with your own heart which you feel the sin and needs of most keenly moving out to family, friends, pastors, those in authority,

missionaries, general needs in the larger body of Christ and the cause of Christ in missions and culture

- ACTS- Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication

So the first pair is free and formed. Unstructured with free flowing needs and thanks and praise; and structured with helps like the Bible, lists, books and patterns. If you are "devoted to prayer" you will pursue freedom and form in your prayer life.

## A- Alone and Assembled

Being devoted to prayer will mean that you will regularly pray alone and regularly pray in the assembly of other Christians.

How crucial it is that we meet God alone through Jesus Christ. There is no Christianity without a personal trust in and communion with God through Jesus. All is show and husks and pretension without this.

Praying in the assembly of other believers is often more neglected than praying alone. We need to lift each other up. Alone and assembled.

- ❖ James 5:13-15- "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone among you cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? *Let him call for the elders of the church*, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up...."

The New Testament is full of corporate prayer gatherings. In fact most prayer in the New Testament is probably thought of in terms of gatherings for prayer.

- ❖ Acts 1:14- "These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers" - that is typical of what you find.
- ❖ Acts 12:12- "When Peter got out of prison "he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying."
- ❖ Prayer meetings were normal in the early church. Being devoted to prayer in the New Testament surely included praying with God's people. How are you doing in this? This is not advanced Christianity. This is basic Christianity. Let's make it a point this summer to not just go through the "prayer routine" with each other this summer, but to really cry out to God together knowing that He hears our cries and saves us (Psalm 145).

## D- Desperate and Delighted

Being devoted to prayer will mean that you come to God in prayer often desperate and often delighted. It simply means that prayer is a place for meeting God with your deepest heartaches and fears and prayer is a place for meeting God with your highest joys and thanks. The pillow you use for your elbows when you kneel daily before the Father, will be a tear-stained pillow. And yet, because God is a prayer-hearing God, you will say with the apostle Paul, "sorrowful yet always rejoicing" (2 Corinthians 6:10). And often that joy will overwhelm the burdens of this fallen world - as it should - and make you want to leap for joy. The Father wants to meet you at those times too. Be devoted to prayer in desperation and in delight - in fasting and feasting. Not either-or, but both-and.

## E- Explosive and Extended

All I mean here is short and long. I would have said short and long, but then the letters would not match and the acronym would not spell anything. Besides explosive is more vivid and is exactly what prayers can be from time to time. If you are devoted to prayer you will explode regularly with prayers of praise and thanks and need and they will not last more than a few seconds. And if you are devoted to prayer you will have times when you linger for a long time in prayer to the Lord. Sometimes we make a quick phone call to a friend and sometimes you spend an evening together. If you love Christ and lean on him for all things and treasure him above all else, you will meet him often with explosive prayers and often with extended prayers.

## S- Spontaneous and Scheduled

What's the difference between this and "free and formed" or "explosive and extended"? By "free and formed" I meant the content of our prayers - what we do when we come to pray. By "explosive and extended" I meant the length of our prayers. By spontaneous and scheduled I mean when we pray.

If we are devoted to prayer we will pray spontaneously through the day—without ceasing as Paul says—a constant spirit of communion with Christ, walking by the Spirit and knowing him as a continual personal presence in your life (1 Thessalonians 5:17). No plan will govern when you speak to him. It will happen dozens of times in the day. This is normal and good. This is being devoted to prayer.

But if you only have this, you won't have this very long. The true rich fruit of spontaneity grows in the garden that is well tended by the discipline of schedule. So I plead with you, have your set times of prayer. We are blessed with scheduled PDT time every day here. But plan ahead. What about next semester? When will you meet him regularly? How long will you set aside? I encourage you to begin every day this way. Are you willing to plan one or two half-days or days away by yourself—not to read a book but to pray for 4 hours or eight hours? How? By simply reading your Bible and turning it all into prayer—taking a short book of the Bible and reading a chapter and then pausing and praying that chapter into your family and church. Then reading another chapter and praying, and so on. But that does not just happen. It must be planned. It is not spontaneous. It is structured. And it is glorious.

*Modified from: <http://www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/02/122902.html>*