

Starting a Devotional Life

(January 2016)

I'm a realist ... I know there are some among us in the congregation of St. John that do not have a habit of spending time in the Word of God with meditation and prayer each day. Our old sinful nature just knows it's easier not to. Once a week in the pew just doesn't cut it! Repentance for neglecting the Word of God is an ongoing thing ... and with the New Year just starting, maybe you're asking yourself right now: how might one begin or develop a stronger devotional life?

Much of the focus this time of year is often on improving one's diet and exercise or stopping bad habits; it's good to remember the importance of our spiritual lives. Why? Well, think about it. Our faith-life is foundational to every other aspect of our lives. Good stewardship of the body or financial resources, flow from a healthy walk with God too. Overcoming harmful habits can only be accomplished with the strength and resources that are provided by the Spirit of God.

So how can we begin or develop a stronger spiritual life? Let's start by defining what a devotional life is. The definition is in the word. It's time we devote to God. Some key components of that devotional life are the study of God's Word, reflection on it, conversation about it, and time devoted to prayer. This does not necessary need to be a singular or individual pursuit. In fact that would be a misunderstanding of a devotionally full life with Christ. Yes, there are personal times with the Lord in study and prayer, but more so, there are times to learn and grow with your spouse, your family, your church. The bottom line is that we get to have flexibility and creativity in putting these blessings to work in our lives.

The best place to start is with God's Word. It is so important to have the voice of His Word speaking into our lives, because there are so many other voices that bombard us day after day. Bad news comes at us on every front, twenty-four hours a day. Influences that pull us away from Jesus are active and they can be overwhelming. It is essential to let God have His say with His living Word, that Word that cleanses our souls and renews our spirit. That's why the Bible is such a precious gift; the foundation for cultivating a devotional life.

How to start reading the Bible? It's great to read the Bible cover to cover, but I would recommend a different approach. Remember, your goal is not to plow through the whole Bible. Your goal is to hear clearly God's voice in and through His Word, to let Him renew and shape your life. So, I recommend starting with one of the Gospels so a person can get to know Jesus as the Savior. I also recommend reading the smaller epistles of Paul in the New Testament for that big picture perspective. It's not about "getting through it" ... slow is okay. We're not cramming for exams. This is about nourishing one's soul. If something really grips you, take time in that book. Read it closely, pray. Take your time and listen to what God is saying. Then think about how that applies to your life too.

Here also a good study Bible (I recommend the Concordia Self-Study Bible) would help because it has links to other related verses and it would also have notes that could help you understand what God is saying in a particular passage. This type of study is something best done in quiet, solitude, and isolation. Quiet focus is important, but finding silence is not really easy. If a person can find a quiet time or a place for devotions, it's wonderful.

Prayer is another key component of a devotional life. Pray while reading the Bible, pray for understanding; then afterwards, take time to pray about applying God's Word to your life. Bring your prayers of thanksgiving, confession, and supplication to Him. Ask God about what you need. Talk to Him about your life. Celebrate what God has done for you, for all people.

Besides the Bible, there are many excellent resources out there. In fact, Concordia Publishing House has many materials available in their catalogue. We have a reference copy in the Parish Hall at church. Check it out!! Blessings will be yours!

That's the View from Here ... Joyous and blessed New Year to all!!

Pastor Bill Winter