

# The Biblical Counselor

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## No Wonder Your "Devotions" Aren't Working

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Bill Goode

I have just finished reading a number of seminarians' papers in which their goal for personal or family "devotions" often contained strange and unbiblical connotations. The same problem often arises when a counselor gives the homework assignment, "Have devotions seven minutes a day" or "Read three pages in the gospel of John each day."

We hear it also in these statements: "As newly-weds we determined to read through the Bible in a year, but we gave up. We started again the second year and quit sooner that time;" "I deter-

mined to have devotions before meals, seminary studies, preparation for my sermon or sleep, but soon I gave up."

Then there are the ones who have "devotions" but do not change and grow --their devotions don't work. Remember the counselee who was dispensational and who could dot his "I's" and cross the "T's" about the ten toes of Daniel and it's meaning but was a terrible husband, father, neighbor and divisive in church? Or the "Reformed" couple you counseled who had never been saved but who never missed their "devotions"? Or the pastor or missionary who preached week after week, month after month while continuing in

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sexual sin? Nothing jumped off the page and made them differ. Then there were those speakers who whipped us in chapel for using our Bible class assignments or sermon preparation for our "devotions." Somehow Thomas Aquinas had gotten through to them that some parts of life are more sacred than others.

The first question we need to ask is "Can God bless me or will he bless me in this determination to have devotions?" Seriously, should you even try to do what you are setting out to do? Is yours a biblical concept? Hold on now, I am not your enemy, I am honestly trying to be your friend. I am willing to bare my own heart over the wrong connotations so often thrown around from which many of us have suffered. Error is error even when intentions are good.

Have some important truths been ignored or even contradicted?

While the intent may be honorable and a small percentage may end up growing and changing as a result, (I have no argument with those) there is the "carrot on the stick" idea out there called "devotions" (somehow, supposedly a notch above bible study) that is not helping and may be harming many believers.

What is it you are trying to do, or get your counselee to do, when you talk about "devotions" or "quiet time" with God or urge him to "spend seven minutes a day with God"?

For many, "devotions" is a mixture of legalism, Keswick experience, a reading of any portion of scripture (like going to the spiritual drugstore of God's Word and trying any remedy on the shelf); and just plain hope that something will spring off the pages to make them spiritual.

What does this word "devotions" generally mean, and will God bless the activity fitting that definition? What does the Bible teach?

For some, having "devotions" is more sacred than other parts of life; somehow worship and thoughts about God can only occur at this time.

For many, it cannot be a time with study aids--commentaries, language helps, Bible dictionaries or concern for right hermeneutics. And for some strange reason, it can never include a passage you are studying for your Bible or theology classes or for a message you are going to preach. Instead many believe there must be a time in prayer and an open Bible where, without any stab at accurate interpretation of the Word of truth, the participant does an end run around all study aids. (There

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cannot be any work involved -- after all, this is "devotional.") Supposedly, through this spiritual pipeline around accurately interpreted scripture, you get something "fresh" (seemingly from God) even though it may have nothing to do with what the Holy Spirit intended the passage to say.

Or, better still, according to the poems and songwriter's version, one gets an "experience" with God that imparts a spiritual zap, lift or power that drives away the problems for that day. It makes no difference whether or not the believer now knows God or himself or how to handle life more biblically or not. In fact, the "new revelation" just received may be quite contrary to the Word of God because all study and study helps written by "mere humans" were avoided. Somehow, this mystical, evasive concept of "devotions" is supposed to make the individual a spiritual powerhouse for God. Although this concept of devotions is not taught in Scripture, many seemingly carry a load of guilt because they have not attained it, and this failure is heinous to them because "devotional" time is more spiritual than all other.

The common idea of "devotions" also rests upon a type of legalism and a meritorious benefit. Because of it I am now worthy and capable of serving God and winning all of my battles today.

Early in my Christian life and ministry I had the benefit of the Navigator Topical Memory system and Parallel Passage study method. These two things helped me greatly to begin to think sys-

tematically and interpret Scripture by Scripture. These protected me in those times of Bible study and reading when I was traveling and didn't have study helps readily available to try to keep in mind what other passages said on a subject. However, in my own legalistic orientation, when I had checked off a certain amount of Bible study, Scripture memory, reading and prayer I felt I had merited God's favor for the day and could now move on to the less spiritual study of sermons or other mundane deeds. What I actually needed was a time in Bible study to deal with a sinful habit in my life that should be changed, rather than legalistically putting in time at "devotions."

The fact is, merit only comes by grace, and my ability to serve only comes as I apply and obey accurately interpreted Scripture. Worship of Christ can take place during any Bible study I am doing or during any service for Him where I am consciously applying His Word.

Let me close with these all important truths. I am in such desperate need of God's truth that every time I go to the Bible I must always hear, read, study, memorize or meditate looking to know Him, praise and thank Him, or honor and obey Him. All times are sacred. I must be careful to accurately interpret the Word at all times. Therefore, there can be no reading without study nor intake without thought of how to apply. It would be better to work at a short portion of Scripture properly studied and understood, for the purpose of ap-

plying it, than to read five chapters expecting a mystical benefit, experience or merit.

God's Word is the only means of knowledge and awareness of Him and how I can please Him. There are no end runs around thoughtful, purposeful, careful study of His Word. His Spirit Who gave us His sword always uses the mind (1 Cor. 14:15) and invites our regular careful search that we may learn of His ways in order to know Him, praise Him, change and grow in His likeness.

If this English word "devotions" has taken on wrong connotations for you, it would probably be helpful to return to biblical terms such as hearing, reading, studying, memorizing, worshipping, honoring and obeying God's Word.

God grant us always a hunger and thirst for His likeness so that we prayerfully and thoughtfully approach His Word to know Him, praise, thank, honor and obey Him.

### **Don't Miss This New Book!**

***Why Christians Can't Trust  
Psychology***

**by Ed Bulkley, Ph. D.**

**Harvest House Publishers**

**Ed will be presenting a workshop  
at this year's NANC Annual Conference  
and speaking briefly at  
the Conference business session.**