

The proper way to do devotions

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I always knew that people of faith were supposed to have devotional time. When I joined the church, I sort of expected someone to tell me the “official” Christian devotional method. But no one did. It wasn’t covered in the new members’ class. And that was for me somewhat unsettling. I knew I should be doing something, but I couldn’t figure out what that something was. I felt adrift, unsure of what I should be doing and a little worried I might be doing it wrong.

Of course if you browse in a bookstore or online there are plenty of suggestions about what to do. Some authors are quite emphatic about what one ought to do. There are daily devotion books of every kind: for mothers, sons, couples, busy people, retired people, C. S. Lewis fans. There are books to help you with daily prayer. There are books to help you read the Bible in a year. The variety can be bewildering and overwhelming. It took me a long time to figure out what to do—years in fact.

After all those years of searching for the proper way to do devotions, I want to share what I have learned. And here it is. In one short sentence:

There is no proper way to do devotions.

Or to put it more positively, there are a lot of ways to do devotions. It is not a one-size-fits-all practice. Don’t worry about finding the perfect form of devotion. Think of it as an adventure or a treasure hunt or a journey. Just get started. Pick something and begin. If it doesn’t work well for you, quit with a clear conscience and try something else. There will be something that works for you—even if it takes you a while to find it.

You should be honest with yourself about your temperament and how much time you honestly are able to spend in devotions. Ten minutes may be too short for you or maybe it will be too long. If you have trouble sitting still, look for something you can walk with, or use prayer beads to keep your hands busy. If you love beautiful language, try a prayer book from the liturgical tradition of your choice. Sing, chant,

read out loud, draw, kneel, stand, dance, sit and watch the sun rise. Do whatever brings you into God's presence.

The other thing I have learned is that what is life-giving at one time in your life may not be helpful in other times of your life. As a single person you may be able to spend an hour a day in devotions. As the parent of a couple of toddlers—probably not. There may be stressful times in your life when what you need to do is rest in God's loving presence. At other times you might do some serious Bible study. We change. We mature. We grow. And so our prayer time needs to change and grow as well.

It's not what you do, or how much time you spend that is important. What is important is to try. Try, knowing some days you simply won't be able to. Try, even if all you can manage is "help me" before you get out of bed. Try, even if all you can say is "thank you" before you go to sleep.

Over a lifetime, small regular practices will change you. You may not realize it until you stop and look back over several years. But step by step you will deepen your connection with God. Remember God is willing to meet you more than halfway.

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