

The Single Most Important Habit You Need in 2020

When I was a teenager, my mentor, Barry, taught me to have a daily devotional time with God. This has become the single most important habit in my life, and I'm convinced no one can grow as a Christian without it.

I memorized Proverbs 8:34 when I was just 18: "Blessed is the man who hears me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors." I started getting up early and praying in my college dorm room. I discovered that God promises a blessing to those who spend time with Him! More than 40 years later I'm still setting aside that special time with God.

But how do you structure a daily quiet time in today's overscheduled culture? Many Christians today say they are way too busy to set aside time to pray and read the Bible. Instead, they multi-task their devotional lives by listening to Christian podcasts while commuting to work or praying under their breath while showering or brushing their teeth.

There's nothing wrong with doing those things, but if you never set aside time to focus wholeheartedly on prayer or the Bible, your relationship with God will feel cluttered and superficial. It's not too late to develop new habits. Here are a few ways you can make your time with God richer and more intimate.

Set a regular time for your "date" with God. There is no rule about when to pray. Some people prefer mornings; others find prayer easier in the evening hours. Devotional time works better for me early in the morning, before life's pressures crowd my time. Once you develop your unique habit, and you realize how much you benefit from it, you'll find you simply can't live without time with God.

Choose a special place that gives you privacy. Jesus reminded us that seclusion is a secret to effective prayer. He said: "But you, when you pray, enter your closet, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret" (Matt. 6:6a). This doesn't mean you can't pray while driving to work. But you need a quiet place in order to focus. My favorite chair in my study at home is where I'm most centered.

Turn off your phone. Would you talk to friends, reply to texts or answer emails during a date with your spouse? Not unless you trivialize that relationship. The same principle applies when you spend time with the Lord. We need to reclaim the art of undistracted devotion.

I love my phone, but I've found it necessary to silence it during my times with God. And if you use your phone to read the Bible, consider switching to an old-fashioned hard copy of the Scriptures. The temptation to check messages or post Instagram photos can waste time and ruin your devotional life.

Don't put yourself under pressure. You don't have to read 50 chapters of the Bible or pray three hours. Pace yourself. Be realistic and take small steps. If you have not been seeking the Lord regularly, start by reading a chapter a day in the Bible and praying for 15 minutes. Eventually you will want more. It is better to be a tortoise than a hare. The key is to be consistent.

Learn to "chew" the Bible. One of the simplest ways to study the Bible is to read one book at a time (such as Romans or Isaiah) and slowly digest each verse. The biblical word "meditate" means "to chew," as a cow chews its cud over and over. The more you read a passage, the more "juice" you squeeze out of it!

Don't just read; listen for God's voice. Some people have complained to me, "I just never hear God speaking." Yet when I ask if they read the Bible regularly, they say they're too

busy. God wants to speak directly to us through the pages of His Word.

When you read Scripture with a prayerful heart, God can cause a verse to jump off the page as a direct, personal message. British preacher Charles Spurgeon recognized this years ago when he wrote: "When I have been in trouble, I have read the Bible until a text has seemed to stand out of the Book, and salute me, saying, 'I was written specially for you.'"

Use a prayer list. Many Christians think prayer is just about getting their own needs met. But Jesus calls us to a deeper place of sacrifice by inviting us to pray for others. I love what Samuel told the people of Israel when they were in trouble. He said: "Moreover as for me, God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you" (1 Sam. 12:23).

Years ago, I started the habit of praying for certain people God had put in my life. Today, I have a long list of people I pray for regularly. Pouring my heart out in prayer for them has become one of the most fulfilling spiritual disciplines I engage in. During 2019 I saw so many answers to prayer: Babies were conceived, churches were planted, single people found spouses, prodigals came home and many of my friends found healing or financial breakthrough in response to prayer.

The apostle Paul feared that the Corinthians might be "led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ" (2 Cor. 11:3, NASB). Our media-saturated culture gives us a million ways to occupy our time, but simple devotion remains the antidote to all distraction. As you step into 2020, reset your priorities and make it your goal to spend time with God.