

## HOW to Pray – John Piper

But for the rest of our time this morning I want to talk about the HOW of prayer. I want to try to inspire you with practical, Biblical possibilities that you may have never considered, or perhaps tried and then failed to persevere - failed to "be devoted to prayer."

This is my effort to sketch what it means to be devoted to prayer without a narrow my-way-or-the-highway mentality. We are all very different. Our schedules are different. Our families are different. We are in different stages of life with different demands on our days. We are at different levels of spiritual maturity, and no one matures over night. What you may be doing in five years in your devotion to prayer may make you look back and wonder how you survived this season of leanness. But all of us can move forward. Paul loves to write to his churches and say, "You are doing well, but do so more and more" (1 Philippians 1:9; Thessalonians 4:1, 10). And if there is any place where the "do so more and more" applies, it is in our devotion to prayer.

I will put these practical suggestions in five pairs each beginning with a different letter that together spell "F A D E S." There is no significance to the word "fades." That's just what they happened to spell. But if you wanted to force it, you could say without these pairs, devotion to prayer "fades."

### **F - Free and Formed**

I have in mind here 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-r, 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.

### **Form #1. The Bible.**

Pray the Bible. Pray Biblical prayers. This week we are building our prayers around the prayer in Ephesians 3:14-19.

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, 16 that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith - that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Memorize it and pray it often. Pray the Lord's prayer and as you pray it put each phrase in your own words and apply it to the people you are burdened about. Pray the commands of the Bible: "Help me - help my wife, my children, the elders, our missionaries to love you, O God, with all my heart and all my soul and all my strength." Pray 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." Pray the warnings of the Bible: "Or 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." Open the Bible in front of you and put one elbow on one side and one on the other and pray every paragraph of into contrition or praise or thanks or petition.

### **Form #2. Lists.**

Pray 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. I have memorized about 70 people that I pray for by name every day. But that does not include the list of people who came to missions in the manse that Noel and I pray for each night from a written list. It does not include the list of our missionaries that I read from a list. And that's just people, not to mention needs that change in my own soul and in the family and in the church and in the world week by week. So I encourage you to use lists of people and lists of needs. 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.

### **Form #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 my book, Let the Nations Be Glad, and turn to

pages 57-62 and pray through the 36 things 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. We are so foolish to think that left to ourselves we will see all the Bible has to say and all the needs we should pray about without the help of good books.

### **Form #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. One pattern, as I already mentioned, would be to structure your prayers around each of the petitions of the Lord's prayer. A pattern that I use virtually every day is the pattern of concentric circles starting with my own soul - which I feel the sin and needs of most keenly - and moving out to my family, and then the pastoral staff and elders, then all the church staff, then our missionaries, and then general needs in the larger body of Christ and the cause of Christ in missions and culture. Without some form or pattern like this I tend to freeze and go nowhere.

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. O 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. Susana Wesley with her 16 children used to pull her apron over her head in the kitchen and all the children had learned that this meant silence in the kitchen. Children need to

learn that mommy and daddy have times with Jesus that are sacred and may not be interrupted. Find the place, plan the time, teach the children discipline.

But I think that praying in the assembly of other believers is more neglected than praying alone. Alone and assembled. 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 and I think normative 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. This week we have twelve 30-minute prayer meetings planned plus the eight hours of prayer all night on Friday. The options are meant to help you make a new breakthrough. During the rest of the year there are 30-minute prayer meetings six mornings each week, Wednesday evening at 5:45 downtown. Then there are the small groups that meet for prayer and ministry. Then there is Sunday morning that includes prayer in song and other ways. If assembling for prayer is not part of your devotion to prayer, make 2003 a breakthrough year. Both-and: free and formed, alone and assembled.

### ***D - Desperate and Delighted***

Being devoted to prayer will mean that you come to God in prayer often desperate and often delighted. I simply mean 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 I make a quick phone call to Noel and other times we 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. No plan will govern when you speak to him. It will

happen dozens of time 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. Plan it for 2003. 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 or with a friend or your spouse - 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. Noel and I have had some of our richest days away by taking a short book of the Bible and reading a chapter and then pausing and praying that chapter into our 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.

So there you have it. God's word to us to day is "Be devoted to prayer." Be constant in it. Be faithful in it. Why? God commands us to; the needs are great and eternity hangs in the balance; and God hears and does more in five seconds that we can do in five years.

And how shall we be devoted to prayer? These things. Without them prayer F A D E S.

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## Developing a Prayer Plan

One of the main reasons we do not pray is because we do not have a plan. Where do I pray? What do I pray? When do I pray? All these questions, if not answered will hinder your prayer life. John Piper comments on this:

*"Unless I'm badly mistaken, one of the main reasons so many of God's children don't have a significant life of prayer is not so much that we don't want to, but that we don't plan to. If you want to take a four-week vacation, you don't just get up one summer morning and say, "Hey, let's go today!" You won't have anything ready. You won't know where to go. Nothing has been planned.*

*But that is how many of us treat prayer. We get up day after day and realize that significant times of prayer should be a part of our life, but nothing's ever ready. We don't know where to go. Nothing has been planned. No time. No place. No procedure.*

*And we all know that the opposite of planning is not a wonderful flow of deep, spontaneous experiences in prayer. The opposite of planning is the rut. If you don't plan a vacation, you will probably stay home and watch TV. The natural, unplanned flow of spiritual life sinks to the lowest ebb of vitality. There is a race to be run and a fight to be fought. If you want renewal in your life of prayer, you must plan to see it."*

# Prayer Plan

## Day 1

*Area of Growth:*

*Sin Struggle:*

*Christian:*

*Non-Christian:*

*Other:*

## Day 2

*Area of Growth:*

*Sin Struggle:*

*Christian:*

*Non-Christian:*

*Other:*

## Day 3

*Area of Growth:*

*Sin Struggle:*

*Christian:*

*Non-Christian:*

*Other:*

## Day 4

*Area of Growth:*

*Sin Struggle:*

*Christian:*

*Non-Christian:*

*Other:*

## Day 5

*Area of Growth:*

*Sin Struggle:*

*Christian:*

*Non-Christian:*

*Other:*

## Day 6

*Area of Growth:*

*Sin Struggle:*

*Christian:*

*Non-Christian:*

*Other:*