

A Personal Devotion Guide for the Pastor

Your walk with Christ sets the ceiling for your church's health. This is a plain, unhurried place to guard it, and to keep it from being crowded out.

Why this comes first

If you are holding this, you have likely been preaching for a while. You have buried people, opened the building on Sunday morning, kept the lights on, and worked another job besides. Ministry in a small church has a way of pressing on the very hour you would most like to keep for the Lord. Not because you stopped valuing it, but because everything else arrives with a name and a phone number attached.

So take this as a reminder rather than a diagnosis. Whatever shape your private walk is in this week, the pull away from it is real and it never fully lets up. Most of us were never sat down and shown how to do this; we picked it up on the fly, and what we picked up tends to bend under a hard week. What follows is not a rebuke. It is a pattern to hold onto.

The Power step of the EMPOWER process anchors revitalization in the Holy Spirit rather than in strategy. Acts 1:8 is the engine: *you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you*. That power is not a technique the church acquires; it flows through people who are near to God. Which means the work begins in you, before it ever touches a committee or a calendar.

"Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness."

1 TIMOTHY 4:7

Donald Whitney, in *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, builds everything on that verse, and it is worth getting the order right. **Godliness is the goal. The disciplines are only the means.** They earn you nothing. They are not a way of impressing God,

proving your seriousness, or paying off guilt. Whitney puts it plainly: discipline without direction is drudgery. If you take up a habit with no destination in mind, you will keep it for three weeks and resent it for the rest.

His other picture is the one that helps most. The disciplines are ways of **placing yourself in the path of God's grace**. Bartimaeus could not heal himself; he could sit where Jesus was walking and call out. Zacchaeus could not summon the Lord; he could climb a tree along the road He was traveling. Neither man manufactured anything. Each one got himself where Christ was passing by. Opening your Bible in the morning is that tree.

This is why it comes first in the Power phase. You cannot lead a congregation into a life you are not living. A church rarely rises above the spiritual health of the man in the pulpit. Not because he is the source, but because he is the one showing them what nearness to Christ looks like on a Tuesday. Healthy churches are not built in a weekend, and neither is this. Start small and stay with it.

One more word before the pattern. Whitney notes that **Bible intake is the most important discipline, and the broadest**. It has several doors into it: hearing the Word, reading it, meditating on it, and memorizing it. You already hear it and read it. The daily pattern below simply keeps all four doors open, including the one that is easiest to let swing shut.

The daily pattern: Word first, prayer flowing out of it

George Müller spent years beginning his mornings with prayer and found himself wandering, dry, and often discouraged before ten minutes had passed. Then he changed the order. He began instead with meditation on the Word, reading slowly, thinking on a verse, turning it over, and he discovered that the meditation turned almost immediately into prayer. Confession rose out of what the text exposed. Thanksgiving rose out of what it promised. Intercession rose out of what it reminded him of. He stopped trying to start the engine cold.

That is the core of what follows. You are not going to pray for twenty minutes off a blank page. You are going to read, stop, think, and then talk to God about what you just read. Fifteen to twenty minutes is a real beginning. What matters far more than the length of the time is the quality of the attention you bring to it.

01 Read a short passage, slowly

Ten to fifteen verses is plenty. Follow a plan so you are not hunting each morning (see the starter plan on the last page). Read it once for the sense of it, then once more without hurrying.

02 Pick one verse and stay there

Choose the verse that stood out. Not the most important one; the one that caught you. Meditation is nothing mystical; it is thinking about a text on purpose. A few questions that get it moving:

- What does this say about God?
- What does it say about me?
- Is there something here to obey, to confess, to believe, or to be thankful for?
- If I actually believed this today, what would be different by supper?

03 Turn the verse into prayer

Do not switch activities. Keep going in the same direction. Pray the text back to God. It will usually come out in this order on its own:

- **Confession:** where this verse finds me out.
- **Thanksgiving:** what it reminds me God has already done.
- **Intercession:** your family, then your people by name, then yourself as their pastor.

Prayer is learned by praying. No book will teach it to you. You learn to pray the way a boy learns to swim: in the water, badly at first.

04 Write one line before you close the book

One sentence in the margin or a cheap notebook: what you saw, and what you intend to do about it. This is what keeps the habit from becoming a blur, and it is where next Sunday's sermon quietly starts feeding on something real.

When a day gets taken from you, and some will be, the next morning is not a debt to repay. Pick up where the plan is. Guilt has never once produced godliness, and it will not start with you.

The weekly rhythm: one thing beyond the daily

Once the daily pattern has a few weeks behind it, add **one** element a week, not three. Pick a day the church does not need you and guard it the way you would guard a hospital visit. Choose from these three, and stay with one choice for a full month before you try another.

Silence and solitude: 60 to 90 minutes

Go somewhere no one can reach you: a truck on a dirt road, an empty sanctuary on a weekday, a fishing spot. Take a Bible and leave the phone in the console. No agenda, no sermon prep, no list. Most pastors find the first thirty minutes uncomfortable and the last thirty worth the whole week. Jesus did this often, and He had more to do than you do.

Fasting: one meal, with a purpose

Start with a single meal, and give it a stated reason: a decision in front of you, a family in the church, your own hardness of heart. Fasting without a purpose is just skipping lunch. Spend the time you would have eaten in prayer over that one thing. Tell no one but your wife. *(If you have a health condition, ask your doctor first. There is no piety in being reckless.)*

Extended prayer: a full hour, out loud

Walk the church property or your own land and pray aloud through your membership roll, a family at a time. Out loud keeps your mind from drifting; walking keeps you awake. An hour sounds impossible until you pray for people by name, and then it is not enough.

J.C. Ryle observed that the difference between believers who are eminently holy and everyone else lies almost entirely in their habits of private prayer.

Not gifting. Not education. Not the size of the field they were given. What they did when no one was watching.

Ten honest questions

Answer these alone, with a pen, and do not perform. No one is grading this, and they are meant to be revisited: a check on the gauges, not a report card. Answer three of them if ten is too many.

After each one, write the smaller question: **What is one thing I could do this week to improve it?**

- 01** If your growth in godliness were measured by the quality of your Bible intake, what would the result be?

- 02** When did you last read a passage of Scripture with no intention of preaching it to anyone?

- 03** If your congregation prayed exactly as much and as honestly as you do in private, what would your church look like in a year?

- 04** What is the one hour of your week that is most reliably yours, and what currently occupies it?

- 05** Is there a discipline you tend to pass over because you are afraid you would be bad at it? Name it.

- 06** Who in your life is free to ask you how your walk with Christ is going and expect a straight answer?

- 07** When you sit down to pray, what most often pulls you away: distraction, discouragement, or the sense that nothing is happening?

- 08** What verse could you honestly say has shaped how you handled something in the last month?

- 09** Are you pursuing these habits to be nearer to Christ, or to quiet a guilt you are carrying? Be honest; the answer changes what you do next.

- 10** If your private walk with God stayed exactly as it is for the next five years, what would your church have received from you?

Your starter plan

Fill this in by hand. It is not a covenant and no one is going to collect it. It is a decision made once, and written down, so the week has a harder time taking it from you. Keep it in the front of your Bible.

WHEN

A specific time, not “mornings.” Fifteen minutes you can actually keep beats an hour you cannot.

I will meet with the Lord at

for about how long

WHERE

One place, the same place. A chair, a truck, a corner of the shop. Leave the Bible there.

My place is

What I need to move or change so it is ready

WHAT I AM READING

Not what you are preaching. Pick one of the plans below, or bring your own. There are more good reading plans online than you could work through in a lifetime, and your coach can point you to one if you would rather be handed something. What matters is that the decision is already made when you sit down.

- **Mark, then John.** Ten to fifteen verses a morning. About three months for both.
- **One psalm a day.** Start at Psalm 1. Good alongside whatever else you are reading.
- **Philippians, slowly.** Five or six verses a day, and read the whole letter again every Sunday afternoon.
- **Proverbs by the date.** The chapter matching the day of the month. A full pass every month.

Book or plan

Where I will write my one line each day

MY WEEKLY ELEMENT

One only. Silence and solitude, fasting, or extended prayer, and the day it happens.

I will practice

on this day, at this time

WHO IS ASKING ME ABOUT IT

This is the easiest piece to leave blank, and it is the piece that makes the rest last. One man who has permission to ask: your EMPOWER coach, a pastor down the road, a deacon you trust.

His name

When I will ask him, and how often we will talk

Keep Christ at the center. Health is the fruit; His glory is the goal.

The framework here is drawn from Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (NavPress), paraphrased. If this guide is useful to you, the book is worth owning. Your coach can help you find a copy.