

CHAPTER 4

How I Lost My Devotional Life

-or-

If It Ain't Broke, Don't Fix It

I turned my life over to Christ while I was stationed on an army base. I was alone in making this decision. As far as I knew, there were no other Christians in my barracks. I had been taught the gospel years before in Sunday school, thank the Lord, and that's the only reason I understood how to receive him.

Immediately after I received him, I wanted to buy a Bible and study it. I wanted time with God. I wanted to pray. I didn't know most Christians called this practice "devotions".

I was so full of joy! I had been a chief among sinners, always in trouble, who had been reconciled to God and saved as a gift because Jesus died for me. My response was a strong desire to know God. And I wanted to learn to share him with others. I had a genuine hunger for the Lord.

I found a chaplain on the army base who gave me the key to his office, and every evening I eagerly spent literally hours with God. The words in my Bible lived; the prayers I prayed were answered; God showed me so much then. This continued for months.

After I was discharged from the army, I began to associate more and more with Christians. They were very sincere, and they immediately began to teach me that I *had* to have a devotional life. Not just, hey, the Lord really wants time with you, and you need this for your spiritual growth (which would be the correct approach), but, you *have* to do this if you want God's blessing and direction on your life day by day. And in addition: Devotional time early in the morning is best. Thus, my evening devotions, though powerful, were inferior to morning devotions. Christians who rose early in the morning were considered more spiritual. (I had best hasten to add that the Christians who said these things to me may not have meant their statements as strongly as I took them. I may well have jumped to the wrong conclusions totally on my own.)

Unknown to me, I moved from practicing devotions as a *response* to grace to devotions as a *law for righteousness*. I already had God's blessing and direction on my life as gifts, but now, it seemed, I had to try to earn these gifts. I already had a healthy relationship with God as a gift, but now I had to try to earn it.

What do you suppose happened to my devotional life after that? Right! It died. It became drudgery after that, and much less edifying.

All legalism bears similar fruit: *death*. As soon as I shifted from the grace basis of relating to God (being a simple sinner saved by grace) to the works basis (developing my own righteousness), sin revived and my spiritual life died. Bang! As though I were shot! Whenever I succeeded at keeping my devotions religiously, I felt righteous (self-righteous), and whenever I failed I felt that God had withdrawn his presence from me.

For the letter [law] kills, but the Spirit gives life (2 Corinthians 3:6).

I encourage you, by the mercies of God, to put all of your confidence in the Lord. He can bless you and direct you even if your devotional life presently stinks! He can create devotion in you through grace. Devotions, by definition, should spring from devotion rather than from self-justification.

And may he help us all to learn that since the power of grace ain't broke, we don't need to fix it with legalism.

As time goes on, we shall observe how faithfulness and self-control—both of which are fruit of the Spirit, according to Galatians 5:22-23—play a role in building a stable devotional life. Suffice it for now to say that the fruit of the Spirit is utterly opposed to legalism. Legalism is any systematic attempt to earn right standing before God. Whereas, in contrast, true obedience to the Lord is never an attempt to earn right standing before him. Instead, it is a response of simple faith to *the gift* of righteousness we have received from him in Christ.