

## **“Time Alone: The Disciplines of Solitude and Silence”**

*(Third in a series of messages: Living a God-shaped Life – A Disciple’s Disciplines)*

By Dr. Mark Smith

February 20, 2011

1 Kings 19:11-13, Mark 1:29-38, Mark 6:30-32

### *Jesus Heals Many*

<sup>29</sup> As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. <sup>30</sup> Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her. <sup>31</sup> So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them.

<sup>32</sup> That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. <sup>33</sup> The whole town gathered at the door, <sup>34</sup> and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.

### *Jesus Prays in a Solitary Place*

<sup>35</sup> Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. <sup>36</sup> Simon and his companions went to look for him, <sup>37</sup> and when they found him, they exclaimed: “Everyone is looking for you!”

<sup>38</sup> Jesus replied, “Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.” <sup>39</sup> So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.

<sup>30</sup> The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. <sup>31</sup> Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.”

<sup>32</sup> So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. <sup>1</sup>

\*\*\*\*

We are exploring together some of the time –honored spiritual practices that have always enabled the followers of Jesus to grow spiritually and to become more like him. As disciples – or student apprentices – our goal is to be like our master – our teacher, so that others can see something of him in us.

I began last week with the discipline of celebration – the practice of joy – which is to say you and I would do well to look more intentionally for all that is good and true and beautiful in life and receive it all as a gift from God – who, as I said, is all about joy. Indeed, God is the most joyous being in the universe and he wants to share his joy with us. All this is truly cause for constant celebration!

Now it follows that if you and I are to fully experience this joy – if we are to properly appreciate and celebrate the goodness of life and the greatness of God and if we are to be more like Jesus (the joy-bringer) - we must engage in the practice of two more very important closely-related spiritual disciplines: solitude and silence.

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (Mk 6:30–32). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

There is an old saying – *“What is this life if so full of care, we have no time to sit and stare.”* In other words, it’s hard to celebrate life and the good things of God if we are always on the run – always on the way to somewhere else and never taking time out to be by ourselves and just “be.”

I frequently hear the lament, *“I am feeling so overwhelmed, I don’t even have time to think.”* Such is modern life. We live in world so filled with noise and with hurried, feverish activity. It’s a wonder that we can maintain our sanity at all! John Ortberg says this world suffers from a severe case of “hurry-sickness.” It just isn’t healthy. The sheer busyness of life not only can stunt our spiritual growth but takes its toll in terms of fatigue, depression, and heart attacks.

So it is understandable why Dallas Willard, who has written some great books on the spiritual life, should say that the disciplines of solitude and silence are the most important disciplines for our time. In the practice of solitude we jump out of the rat race – we intentionally disengage from human interaction just to be by ourselves. We find a solitary place – a quiet place at home, a favorite spot in the woods, a walk on the beach. It is simply time alone –

And along with solitude, we practice the discipline of silence, we turn off our radios and TV’s and Ipods and the constant buzzing around us, so that we can quiet our hearts and be fully present to ourselves and to God.

Being alone and being silent is hard for many of us. For one thing, it is so rare we are not quite sure what to do with ourselves. It’s especially hard for extroverts, who get their energy from being with others. To them, the thought of being alone for any length of time without anything to do and anything to listen to or watch may seem scary and may view it as something like a punishment or a waste of time (though it really isn’t!).

I do not think of myself as an extrovert, but I remember the thought of vacationing in a place without a TV or without wireless capability actually made me nervous – until I discovered how nice it actually was to be totally unplugged.

One writer on the Christian spiritual life, Henri Nouwen, says that solitude and silence strips away our “scaffolding.” Scaffolding is everything we use to keep ourselves propped up, to convince ourselves that we are important or okay. In solitude we have no friends to talk with, no phone calls or meetings, not television sets, no music or books or newspapers to occupy and distract the minds... In the outer world, we are always playing a role – father, mother, friend, neighbor, colleague... but in solitude it is, to use the words of the old hymn, *“Just as I am.”* We are who we really are when we are completely alone, left to our own thoughts. And that, in itself is scary, because then we will have to face our own inner condition – our boredom, our spiritual emptiness, our own sinfulness and our inner “demons” if you will. But face them we must, if we are to grow. And it is in the solitude and silence we also meet God. *“Settle yourself in solitude and you will come upon Him in yourself”* said Teresa of Avila...

Jesus understood the importance of solitude and silence. At the beginning of his ministry, after his baptism, Jesus went into the wilderness for an extended period of solitude and prayer and fasting. He withdrew again by himself when he heard of the death of John the Baptist, and again on the night before he chose his twelve disciples.

We read how, after a particularly busy day of ministry, Jesus got up the next day very early, while it was still dark, left the house, and went to a solitary place to pray.

In the last week of his life, he retreated to the Garden of Gethsemane, where he went off by himself to pray. He ended his ministry as he began it; in solitude. Indeed, it was a pattern throughout his life – the busyness of ministry made it all the more necessary for him to withdraw.

Jesus taught his followers to do the same.

One day the disciples came back after a mission trip. They were anxious to tell Jesus all they had accomplished his name – they were excited but exhausted at the same time. Knowing they were tired, Jesus said to them, **“Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.’ So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place.”**

If it was important to Jesus and the disciples to do this, it surely is so for you and me. Let’s review a few reasons why the disciplines of solitude and silence are so important:

**First of all, you and I need rest, pure and simple.** We need time alone to recuperate physically and mentally, to get refreshed, so that we can re-enter life’s daily round with greater energy and a greater capacity to love others. That is one reason why God gave us the command to observe the Sabbath day, so that we might learn to rest from our labors – so that we would spend time not doing but just “being.” Solitude and silence allows us to get away from it all, to retreat to recharge our physical and spiritual batteries. There is something energizing about spending some time alone in a quiet place (even for extroverts!).

**The practice of solitude and silence is also necessary to experience joy.** Like I say, if we have no time simply to sit and stare and appreciate the simple gifts of life given to us by God, we are missing out on joy. John Ortberg says we need to practice “slowing” – we have to slow down enough – quit moving long enough - so that we can notice the wonder and the beauty all around us. What do we miss of life’s simple pleasures because we are in a hurry to get somewhere else? Solitude and silence forces us to slow down and to be more attentive.

God himself needed to take time out on the seventh day, so that he could sit back and admire the beauty of his own creation. Perhaps we should spend more time admiring it as well. Speaking of creation:

I don’t know if you have been to Lake Louise in the Canadian Rockies, but it is just gorgeous. It’s one of the most spectacularly scenic places in the world. It seems a van loaded with an American tourist family roared into the parking lot by the lake. A woman jumped out of the car with a map in hand and asked a man standing nearby, *“Sir, can you tell me where we can find Lake Louise?”*

The woman then spun around, marked her map, jumped into the wagon, and banged the door closed. She turned to her husband and said, "Well, honey, we've done Lake Louise!" And the car ground off down the highway in a cloud of dust. How much do we miss in all our hurry?

That reminds me of a cartoon in the New Yorker Magazine: An American couple are dashing up the steps of the famous Paris museum, *The Louvre*, shouting: "Where's the Mona Lisa? We're double parked!"

The experience of solitude and silence encourages us to slow down and smell the roses.

**More importantly, you and I engage in the disciplines of solitude and silence to better hear the voice of God.** When we are so busy taking care of people and doing things, and our lives are so filled with noise – all the time – God can hardly get a word in edgewise.

I think of the prophet Elijah, who was engaged in a great battle with the wicked queen Jezebel and the false prophets of Baal. Elijah defeated the false prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. It was a glorious victory and Elijah was on top of his game. His life was awash with activity. But then he suddenly lost his nerve, grew physically exhausted and lost his spiritual perspective. But God nursed him along, eventually leading him to a cave – a quiet place of solitude – and Elijah was finally in a position to really hear what God had in mind for him to do.

It was in the solitude of a cave that God spoke to him... In 1 Kings 19:11ff. we read:

**<sup>11</sup> The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by."**

**Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. <sup>12</sup> After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. <sup>13</sup> When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.**

**Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"<sup>2</sup>**

In other words, the Lord more often than not speaks to our hearts in quiet ways, sometimes just a whisper. And it is in places of solitude where we have quieted all other voices that we are in the best position to listen.

In the solitude, in the silence, we ask the Holy Spirit to speak to us... Is there an issue in our life that he wants us to face? Is there something he wants us to correct or mend? Is there a promise he wants us to claim? Is there someone he has in mind for us to serve? In solitude we listen to God – we ask him to speak to us . . . We wait for the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

I mentioned that I am reading a biography of Jonathan Edwards – the great 18<sup>th</sup> century American theologian and pastor and a leading force behind the Great Awakening of faith that took place in his

---

<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (1 Ki 19:11–13). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

day. Solitude and silence were not only key disciplines for him, but for his wife to-be Sarah. Of Sarah, with whom he was much in love, Edwards noted: *“She hardly cares for anything, except to meditate on him [the Lord]...she loves to be alone, and to wander in the fields and on the mountains, and seems to have someone invisible always conversing with her...”*

So, too, you and I can meet God and converse with him, in our quiet times of solitude – wherever we like to go or be, walking around the block, walking on the Mukilteo beach, sitting by ourselves in private place... In these times, we are free ourselves up to listen to God.

**We practice disciplines of solitude and silence, to find rest, to discover joy, to hear God’s voice, and then we must add, to detach ourselves from the world’s values and thought patterns.** We seek to avoid being shaped by the world. Our goal as disciples is, after all, to live a God-shaped life.

John Ortberg notes that *“Solitude is the one place where we can gain freedom from the forces of society that will otherwise relentlessly mold us.”* And he reminds us that we live in a lethal environment... our society is filled with values and pressures and temptations and notions about comfort and success and happiness and the “good life” that are contrary to the kind of life God would have us lead, and so we practice solitude and silence to detach ourselves from all that, refusing to *“let the world around us squeeze us into its own mold.”*

Thomas Merton wrote that the early church fathers placed such a premium on solitude because they considered society to be a shipwreck from which any sane person must swim for his life. The tendency is to drift along, accepting the tenets and values of what is around one, and that leads to spiritual disaster.

The practice of solitude and silence, gives us a sense of detachment from the world around us, gives us spiritual perspective, so that we can view our lives in light of eternity. It helps us to focus on what we truly value, and what we really believe.

Now when it comes to actually practicing the disciplines of solitude and silence, it will take a good deal of perseverance. These things are not easy for us modern folks.

- **I want to encourage us all to start small, and begin with what we can handle - maybe 5 or 10 minutes a day alone with our thoughts and God. Find a favorite place to be and try to listen to what God is saying ...**

One famous pastor – A.W. Tozer, recommends that you and I:

Retire from the world each day to some private spot, even if it be only the bedroom. Stay in the secret place till the surrounding noises begin to fade out of your heart and a sense of God's presence envelopes you. . . . Listen for the inward Voice till you learn to recognize it. Stop trying to compete with others. Give yourself to God and then be what and who you are without regard to what others think. . . . Learn to pray inwardly every moment. After a while you can do this even while you work. . . . Never let your mind remain scattered for very long. Call home your roving thoughts. Gaze on Christ with the eyes of your soul. Practice spiritual concentration.

I think it is pretty fair to say that we are not taking our spiritual life seriously if we do not set aside some time to be alone with God and listen to him. We may have to write this time alone in our datebooks and Google calendars so that no one take away this period of time – however brief... It may work best to start your day this way.

- **We can also try to take advantage of moments of solitude during our day.** Linger a bit longer over your cup of coffee. Go for a short walk during your lunch break and admire the flowering cherries and the crocuses just appearing. Consciously slowing down so as not to miss the beauty around us, pointing our hearts toward God.
- **We can practice unplugging.** We can turn off the TV. We can turn off the radio in the car. We can try to spend a whole weekend without the cell phone, without email, without the computer – we can practice being un-tethered from the technological gadgets that tend to rule our lives, and actually make us busier and feeling more stressful.
- **And then, maybe we can work up to more extended periods of solitude and silence** where we spend a whole morning or a whole day doing nothing in particular but thinking and walking the beach, perhaps with Bible in hand, alone with our thoughts and with our God.

Each of us has to reflect on what it might mean for us to build times of solitude and silence into our lives. We are all busy, to be sure. Jesus himself was busy. But in the midst of our busyness, our hearts can be a circle of inner quiet and peace, if we have taken time to be alone with God.

---

<sup>1</sup> George Marsden, Jonathan Edward, chapter 5, kindle edition