

## Rhythms Silence and Solitude

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It's wonderful to be back with you all. We have been here the last three weeks, but I've had the privilege of sitting in service with my wife and our new baby boy, Luke Matthew. When he was born and we told the doctor his name, the doctor responded: "Are you sure you don't want to name him, 'Matthew Mark Luke and John'?" We thought two gospels were enough!

Many of you have asked how we're doing. Luke Matthew is great. He basically sleeps and eats and fills his diaper and spends most of the day looking adorable. Hudson and Addie are adjusting really well. Keren and I walked out of the room last week, when we came back in, this is what we found (view online sermon to see the photo). The other day I was reading a book to Addie and Luke started to fuss. Before I could get up or even say anything, Hudson, all on his own, went over to Luke, put his pacifier in his mouth and said, "It'll go ok, Luke Matthew; Hudson is here!" Priceless. Addie doesn't talk much yet, but she gives him kisses every day.

Keren is doing well, but she is experiencing some very severe back pain that is limiting what she is able to do physically. Your prayers for her are welcomed and appreciated. As my church, thank you for the time off to be with my family. And a huge thank you to Gary and Emerson for bringing us such incredible messages. I was sitting in church last week and after the sermon ended, I said to Keren, "These have been such incredible messages. With preaching like that, we might as well try to have another kid!" I gave her the eyebrow raise. She threatened to not let me take communion, so I repented. But seriously, I am so, so thankful for Gary and Emerson. Great messages, and godly examples to learn from.

Today, I get to continue in our rhythm series as we are trying to make sure we are not marching to the beat of the world's drum but are instead keeping in step with God, living in a rhythm of life that he created us for, keeping a pace that allows us to abide deeply and richly in Jesus, that allows love for God and love for others to be the natural overflow of our lives. We've already looked at **Sabbath** (stopping once a week), **slowing down** (living at a sustainable pace throughout the week), and **simplicity** (joyfully living within the margins of life so that we can keep our sanity and make sure we have room to be with God), and today we focus on **silence and solitude**. There is a little bit of confusion as to what silence and solitude consist of. Here's a helpful definition: **retreating from the noise, distractions, and busyness of the world in order to be alone with God, listen to God, and respond to God**. Whereas Buddhists may practice this with the end goal of emptiness, in the Christian tradition, we practice this with the end goal of being attentive and aware and of developing a deepening intimacy with God. You can practice silence and solitude in small, medium, and large chunks. A small chunk might look like taking a short 5 or 10 minute walk around your block or workplace once or twice a day to have one-on-one conversation with God. A medium chunk might look like spending 30 or 45 minutes studying the Bible and journaling each morning or evening in order to be with God, or going on a couple hour hike in a national park to enjoy God's presence and creation. A big chunk might look like taking one or more days away from your normal life, but instead of going on a vacation with family or friends, you go on a vacation with God, getting a way for a few days just to develop intimacy and connection with him.

There's lots of different ways silence and solitude can and should be practiced, but they key goal is to make space to be with God. We have to take intentional steps to shut out the noise and distraction and busyness of the world in order to really listen to what God has to say. Let me give you a practical example from my own life. I can't sit in the living room and watch TV if the dishwasher is running. That constant noise, even though it's in another room, keeps me from hearing the show. We live a life with constant white noise going on in the background, and sometimes we need to enter into silence in order to hear what God wants to say. Similarly, solitude isn't about trying to make everyone an introvert, it's not about

loneliness, it's about making sure there is set apart time to be with God and with God alone. I think about it like a marriage. We have three kids now. Keren and I love our kids. We enjoy being around them, going on walks, playing outside, eating with them. But there are times when Keren and I need to be together without our kids. We need to go on dates, occasionally we need an evening away. It's great to be about the kids and friends and other family members and friends, but we need that one-on-one time. That's what solitude is, making sure that you are getting one-on-one time with God to worship him, honor him, and deepen your relationship with him.

- Without silence and solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life. We do not take the spiritual life seriously if we do not set aside some time to be with God and listen to him. — Henri Nouwen
- All the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own room. — Blaise Pascal
- In silence and solitude we slow down long enough to feel all of the emotions we've been running away from. In silence and solitude we face the good, the bad and the ugly in our own heart. We face our desire, our hunger, and thirst for God. And we face our lack of desire, and hunger and thirst for God. We face our insecurity, and our idolatry, our fantasy and everything that lies under the surface of our lives... That misplaced motivation. That addiction we use to make it through the work week, all of it is exposed but in a safe place with God. In silence and solitude we hear the voice of God cut through the cacophony of all the other voices (mom's voice, dad's voice, your boss's voice, social media, our spiritual enemy, etc.) and we learn what is true and what is a lie. We get the right perspective on our life with God. In silence and solitude we come to a new place of freedom. Our successes and our failures slowly start to lose their power over us. As does the tyranny of the approval and disapproval of others. In silence and solitude we come home to God and come home to ourselves. — John Mark Comer

That's what silence and solitude is about. That's the power of silence and solitude. It's a rhythm we have to keep if we want to keep in step with God. Not surprisingly, no one modeled this better than Jesus. All throughout the Gospels we see the way Jesus practiced silence and solitude; he did it in big ways and small ways alike. Let me give you several examples from the gospel of Mark.

In Mark 1:12-13, right after Jesus was baptized, before his public ministry officially began, "At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days." The word for **wilderness** used in this passage is *eremos*. Listen to how a Greek dictionary defines this word:

- An uncultivated, unpopulated place
- A desolate, barren area
- A solitary place that provides needed quiet and freedom from disturbance.

In Scripture, the wilderness is ironically a place where God richly grants his presence and provision for those seeking him. The limitless Lord shows himself strong in the limited spaces of life.

Jesus began his public ministry by retreating to the wilderness for silence and solitude, being alone with God, which is the last thing any PR rep would tell him to do. He needs to get out there in front of people, make his name known, get his message out. No, Jesus needs to retreat and be alone with his Father. If Jesus, the Son of God needed that, how much more do we! When Jesus returned from the wilderness, we see in Mark 1 that in one day he preached in the synagogue, cast out a demon, and healed many people who has physical illnesses—an incredible amount of output. What does he do the next day: "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" (Mark 1:35). The Greek word for solitary place? *Eremos*, "the wilderness," the uncultivated,

unpopulated place where Jesus could go, without distraction, to be with his Father. He did it in big chunks for 40 days, and he did it early in the morning before the demands of the day could assault him.

There was a time, after Jesus spent over a year with his disciples, that Jesus sent his disciples out to preach and do ministry on their own. Listen to what happened when they returned: “The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. 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’” (Mark 6:30-31). The Greek word for quiet place: *Eremos*, an uncultivated, unpopulated place where they could have some peace and quiet, shut out the noise of the world, and be alone with the Father. It was something that Jesus not only modeled himself but trained his disciples to do.

It was also something Jesus did on the last night of his life when he retreated to the Garden of Gethsemane.

They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,” he said to them. “Stay here and keep watch.” Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed. (Mark 14:32-35)

Yet again, Jesus gets away, this time he goes to a garden to meet with his Father! In the most grueling, daunting moment of his life he went to a place where he knew he could meet with God and it changed him. Listen to what Haddon Robinson said about this.

Where was it that Jesus sweat great drops of blood? Not in Pilate's Hall, nor on his way to Golgotha. It was in the Garden of Gethsemane. There he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the One who could save him from death (Hebrews 5:7). Had I been there and witnessed that struggle, I would have worried about the future. If he is so broken up when all he is doing is praying, I might have said, “What will he do when he faces a real crisis? Why can't he approach this ordeal with the calm confidence of his three sleeping friends?" Yet, when the test came, Jesus walked to the cross with courage, and his three friends fell apart and fell away.

Jesus went into his retreat with God with grief, uncertainty, and a sense of crisis; he came out with confidence, courage, and strength. There are things that happen when you are alone with God that change you, and they simply cannot happen any other way.

This is what Christian psychologists refer to as **Godly differentiation**. Everyone in the world faces crises. We all face hardship and uncertainty, pain and brokenness, we all lose people we love, we all have challenges at work, we all have family issues, we all went through COVID and extreme political theater. Those things have the capacity to send people over the edge, make them angry, mad, hostile, disagreeable. As Christians, we lose our witness in the world when we mirror the same kind of crazy as the world. Christians endure the exact same hardship and struggles and cultural phenomena as everyone else. But our default isn't to project our stress and anxiety and anger to the world, to rage on social media, to complain to our friends, to become sour and bitter. Our default is to go to God! To retreat from the commotion of the world into a place of silence and solitude where God can minister to everything going on in our lives.

- “Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous be shaken” (Psalm 55:22).
- “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7).

When we do that, when we find the unpopulated, uncultivated places and go there and cast our anxiety on the one who cares for us, on the one who sustains us and will never let us be shaken, we are changed. The more we wrestle with God in private, the more peace and power we have in public! Think about trees. Y'all know about my love for trees. I planted about 150 of them this spring so far. Do you remember from science class how trees grow? A process called photosynthesis. With energy from the sun, the tree takes in carbon dioxide, which is poisonous to us, transforms it into energy that sustains the tree and helps it to grow, and releases clean oxygen back into the environment. It takes in poison, processes it, grows from it, and then releases life-giving air. That is what ought to happen when we are in silence and solitude with God. We take all the toxins, all the hurt and concerns, all the pain and worries in our world and we bring them to God, we process them with God, we are actually transformed in the process, we grow spiritually to become more like Christ, and instead of releasing toxins back into the world, we become a non-anxious presence who conveys life and peace, health and wholeness to every environment we walk into, to every person we meet. You know what I'm talking about—we all know people and when they walk into a room it's "here comes the crazy!" All they know how to do is project their anxiety, concern, and hurt. But there are people who enter a room and everyone knows, "Here comes a peaceful presence, here comes someone who can ground us, guide us, who can give us wisdom and hope, someone who is resilient, who helps others reclaim their sense of wonder and remember their calling and purpose." That doesn't happen by accident. It happens through transformation that takes place in silence and solitude.

Philippians 4:6-8 says, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." That's the goal. That's the hope. That's what we know is possible. Silence and solitude, retreating from the world to be with God is the path to get there.

Let me share with you four practical tips for cultivating this rhythm in your life, each of which is straight from God's word. First: **prioritize silence and solitude in some way every day.** Psalm 5:3 says: "In the morning, Lord, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait expectantly." I want to highlight two things. When did Jesus pray? In the morning. The power of getting with God before you get on with your day is undeniable. It gives orientation and clarity, joy and energy for the hours that follow. Recently, the moment I wake up, before my feet hit the floor, I say Psalm 23 and ask God to be my shepherd that day, to lead me to still water and green pastures that day. When I get into the office, I try to keep things off my calendar for the first 30 minutes, so that I can open the Scriptures, journal, and pray about the day, the people in our church, the pastors and leaders on our staff, my meetings. I know it can be hard to find time to do this every day. We just had our third child. Sometimes my mornings aren't a serene picture of worship and intimacy with God; they are abrupt because a kid peed their bed or had a bad dream. I am so inspired by the example of a woman named Susannah Wesley, she raised ten kids. Ten kids! One of them was named John Wesley, who started the Methodist church. Another was named Charles Wesley, who wrote over 6,000 hymns, many of which we still sing today. They got their love for God from their mother, who when she couldn't find quite time along to be with God would pull her apron over her head in the middle of the kitchen and turn it into a prayer closet! Even if it can't be in the morning, find a way, make a way to get silence and solitude with God!

**Prioritize silence and solitude in seasons of crisis and fear.** There was a time in the life of King Hezekiah's life where the Assyrian's came to the Israelite's doorstep, surrounded their city and threatened to destroy them. That's enough to terrify anyone, let alone the king who is supposed to be responsible for leading and protecting his people. Listen to what happened:

Hezekiah received the letter from the messengers and read it. Then he went up to the temple of the Lord and spread it out before the Lord. And Hezekiah prayed to the Lord: “Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. Give ear, Lord, and hear; open your eyes, Lord, and see; listen to all the words Sennacherib has sent to ridicule the living God.” (2 Kings 19:14-17)

His life was on the line, his people’s lives were on the line, the legacy of the entire nation was on the line—and what did he do? He didn’t let fear overwhelm him or paralyze him. He didn’t summon all of his generals and advisors to come up with a plan. Instead, he went to the temple, spread his worry out in the presence of God and told God, “We’ve got a problem. What are you going to do about it?” What would happen if that was your pattern in life? How much would change in your world if every time crisis or fear came knocking on your door you went to be with the Lord and took your concern to him? Game changer.

Here’s another principle: **prioritize silence and solitude in seasons of loss and grief.** There was a time in King David’s life when his newborn son wasn’t doing well; it was touch and go. Then “David noticed that his attendants were whispering among themselves, and he realized the child was dead. ‘Is the child dead?’ he asked. ‘Yes,’ they replied, ‘he is dead.’ Then David got up from the ground. After he had washed, put on lotions, and changed his clothes, he went into the house of the Lord and worshiped” (2 Samuel 12:19-20). He just lost his newborn child. I just had a kid. I can’t imagine what that would be like. It would have been so natural for David to medicate himself with drugs and alcohol, distract himself with work, take his pain out on people, but instead he went into the temple and sought the presence of God. I was on the phone recently with a good friend of mine who lost his father last week. He was there when his dad took his last breath. We were talking and he said, “I don’t know if this makes sense, but somehow I have joy in this moment.” My friend had an unexplainable joy because he has cultivated the presence of God in his life. And God is the one who overcomes even the darkest nights and turns them into day.

Here’s the last: **prioritize silence and solitude in seasons of loneliness and uncertainty.** Elijah had a time in his life where the king and queen of Israel killed all the prophets and threatened to kill him, too. He had a time when it looked like the people he was serving were turning away from God to worldly desires and passions. He felt like he was the only one left who cared about honoring God. He wasn’t sure if the next day was going to be his last day on earth, and what did he do? He went away to be with God. 1 Kings 19:8 says, “Elijah traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God.” Elijah felt all alone. He didn’t know what was going to happen next—so he went alone, on a long journey, to meet with God. He spent 40 days and 40 nights to get there, just like Jesus spent 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness. There are times in life when we need to set aside more than just 30 minutes a day, more than just an hour and ten minutes on Sunday, and really journey deep into God’s presence. This is something I have done at least once a year for the last 13 years. I go to a cabin by myself for 3-4 days. Some groceries, a Bible and a journal. No distractions. Time to be with God. It takes me the first 24 hours for the white noise to die down. But then, the clarity of hearing God’s voice, the poignancy of feeling God’s love, the intimacy of sensing God’s presence—it is nearly impossible to describe. Is it inconvenient to set aside several days for that? Yes! Do I still have anxiety and fear that I’ll get there, not hear God and be bored out of my mind? Yes! Have I ever regretted a single retreat I’ve ever taken? No. I would encourage you sometime between now and the end of the calendar year, make time, make space, put everything else away, retreat to the wilderness, find unpopulated, uncultivated space, and get alone with God.

Henri Nouwen said, “Without silence and solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life. We do not take the spiritual life seriously if we do not set aside some time to be with God and listen to him.”

We can't have a thriving spiritual life without silence and solitude. It's not possible. Let's be people who take the spiritual life seriously. Let's be people who make silence and solitude a priority in order make space to be with God.