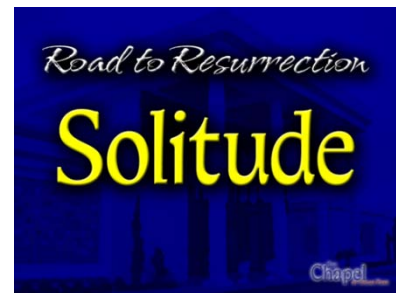


Sermon Solitude

Dan Neary

Last week's experiment was fun. I wasn't exactly sure how you would respond to my invitation to send me text messages during the sermon. I received 6 and did see them while I was preaching. They served as a sort of "digital amen" providing encouragement along the way and letting me know that I was getting the point across.



We'll keep up with the experiment. You can see that I printed my mobile number there again; feel free to send me a text if you'd like.

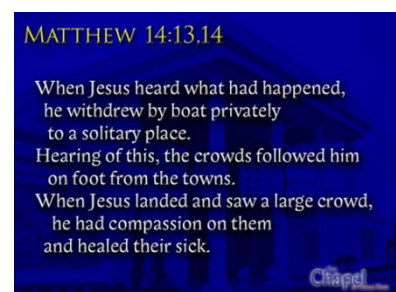
Today is the fourth Sunday of Lent, with just next Sunday, the Sunday after that (Palm Sunday), and then Resurrection Sunday (Easter), the most important day of the Christian year as we celebrate that Jesus is alive... risen from the grave... victorious over sin and death.

In these days leading up to Resurrection Sunday, we have been placing our focus on Jesus in various ways, including:

- Celebration of Disciplines (like fasting, prayer, almsgiving, study) as is customary during Lent
- Writing and reading our blog
- Inviting friends and family to join us here for worship on Sundays
- Sermon series intended to draw us closer to Jesus

Today's sermon, and topic, is solitude.

The passage from the Gospel of Matthew, that George read earlier, is just one example, of the many, that depicts Jesus choosing solitude.



In this specific case, it was a choice for solitude in order to mourn. The first verses of Matthew 14 give the account of John the Baptist's demise at the hand of an evil, corrupt politician. John was beheaded because of his stand for righteousness. When Jesus heard the news, the Gospel of Matthew tells us that Jesus "withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place."

It is a pattern repeated over and over in Gospel accounts:

- Jesus inaugurated His ministry by spending 40 days alone in the desert (Matthew 4:1-11)
- Before He chose the 12 He spent the entire night alone in the desert hills (Luke 6:12)

- When the 12 had returned from a preaching and healing mission, Jesus instructed them, “Come away by yourselves to a lonely place...” (Mark 6:31)
- Following the healing of a leper Jesus “withdrew to the wilderness and prayed” (Luke 5:16)
- With 3 disciples He sought out the silence of a lonely mountain as the stage for the transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-9)
- As he prepared for His highest and most holy work, Jesus sought the solitude of the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-46)

There are several more examples, including the end of the passage George read from Matthew 14.

After having compassion on the masses that were following Jesus by providing a miraculous feast, Jesus sent His friends on ahead. He found a solitary place, on a mountainside, and made it a place of prayer.

MATTHEW 14:22,23

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone

That was the reason Jesus was there in the first place. He sought the solitude of the remote place to pray... but the crowds followed, bringing their needs for healing, and teaching, and feeding. Jesus graciously met their needs... but once the work was complete, He returned to His first priority: solitude.

Solitude. Let's focus on solitude. What was Jesus habitually finding in solitude?

Solitude is not loneliness. Richard Foster, in *Celebration of Discipline*, opens his chapter on solitude by stating: “Jesus calls us from loneliness to solitude.”

Loneliness is scary; nobody wants to be alone, at least not for long. The worst punishment for criminals that we have devised is solitary confinement.

**Solitude
is not
loneliness**

As children, our worst fears are often that we don't have friends.

I don't remember much about early childhood, but I can remember that my most terrifying moments were when I felt like I was separated from my parents.

The home field advantage, when athletes are uplifted by cheering fans, speaks to the power of not being alone. When we are alone, we can feel powerless and hopeless; but we often feel emboldened and strengthened by colleagues, friends, family, and even fans.

Loneliness is terrible. Depression is usually characterized by a sense of deep loneliness.

On the other hand... **being alone is not necessarily solitude**. There are all sorts of ways for us to fill moments when we are alone with **clatter** that crowds out any possibility of solitude.

I can lock myself up in my office for an entire day, and still not have one solitary moment.

- Phone, instant messaging, and email
- Facebook, twitter
- Television, podcasts, and internet
- The projects screaming at me from the drawers in my desk
- And my own obsessing with all the things on the endless to-do list that are way past due

Without being face to face with one person, possibly not even in the same room with another person, I can be alone without any solitude.

Even when I am alone with God, I can easily miss out on solitude... doing all the talking, obsessing about my concerns, so very easily distracted... I can so very easily take a time intended for devotion to God and miss the mark entirely.

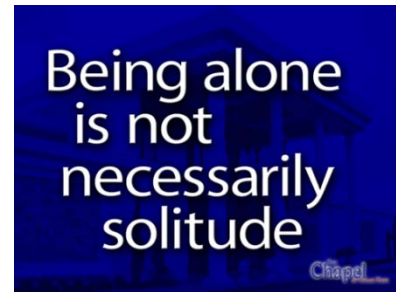
It is easy to forget that **solitude is listening**.

Solitude requires silence. Not necessarily quite, and certainly not all silence, but a good healthy, even overwhelming portion of silence.

The human body is an incredibly complex creation... so complex that it doesn't appear that we have even come close to having it all figured out (take, for example, the science of the appendix; we still don't know for sure what it is for, but we are pretty sure that Steve won't miss his!)

While very complex, there are some things about us humans that are very simple. For example: **mouth on, ears off**. We can't really talk and listen at the same time, whether that be literally, or figuratively. We don't have to be using our audible voice; our inner voice can drown out the loudest external voices. I am sure that I have been accused of not listening because I am usually talking, and when I am not talking I am thinking about what I am going to say as soon as I can jump in and start talking again (others, who actually might be more right, are sure that I never **really think** about what I'm going to say before I start talking!)

I think Foster is right on target when he says, "the purpose of silence and solitude is to be able to see and hear." He goes on to say that, "control rather than no noise is the key to silence."



You don't need quiet for solitude, just silence. It doesn't have to be perfectly quiet in our surroundings; we just need to be quiet.

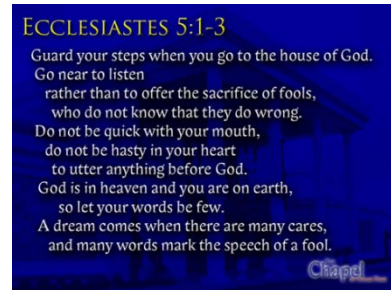
The wise counsel of the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes puts it this way:

Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong.

²Do not be quick with your mouth,
do not be hasty in your heart
to utter anything before God.

God is in heaven
and you are on earth,
so let your words be few.

³A dream comes when there are many cares,
and many words mark the speech of a fool.¹



Remember when I said that I can so easily take my alone time with God and turn it into a period with no solitude? This is what we're seeing here in Ecclesiastes. The call is to shut our mouths, and open the eyes and ears of our spirits.

As a discipline to help us to remember to be silent before God, we actually program into our liturgy some moments of silence. Are we able to make those moments a time of **solitude**? I don't know about you, but I habitually miss the mark. Many times I'm just distracted (and am supposed to be running things around here); often times I consume these moments (that we actually call silent repentance) with my inner voice shouting **I'm sorry**. I need to remember, and I want to encourage you to remember too, to take advantage of those moments to listen to God, to sense His presence and embrace and forgiveness.

So what?

I think there are all sorts of ways that we can make this practical for us today... and we should always work to take something away with us when study the Scriptures. This is more than a mere academic exercise; these Holy Words should change our lives each and every time we encounter them.



Today, I have three specific suggestions for us.

¹ *The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Ec 5:1-3.

First, there is the plain and simple idea that Jesus offers a ***pattern for us***. This habit of solitude seeking that we so plainly see in the life of Jesus offers a blatant challenge to us to place a high value on solitude. The Gospel accounts demonstrate that Jesus instructed His Disciples in this spiritual discipline, and we, who strive to be His followers too, should learn from His pattern.



Foster, again in Celebration of Discipline, offers some “Steps Into Solitude,” including:

- Take advantage of the “little solitudes” (coffee, traffic)
- Instead of vocal prayer before a meal, consider inviting everyone to join into a few moments of gathered silence
- Developing a quiet place (build it in)
- Finding a sanctuary or sanctuaries
- Discipline yourself so that your words are few and full (George)
- Retreat

Here’s the amazing thing: “the fruit of solitude is increased sensitivity and compassion for others.” (Foster)

Again, we see it in the life of Jesus. What example could we possibly produce of a person more compassionate than Jesus? Jesus gave, and gave, and gave (giving His very life)... and we see that these episodes of great giving were preceded by moments of deep, battery-charging solitude.

Foster says, “We must seek out the recreating stillness of solitude if we want to be with others meaningfully. We must seek the fellowship and accountability of others if we want to be alone safely. We must cultivate both if we are to live in obedience.”

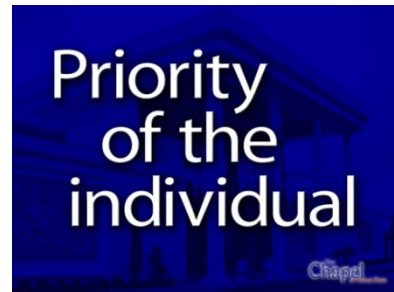
The first practical application is the pattern Jesus offers us.

The second is an urging for us to ***choose to turn loneliness into solitude***. I know that this can be much more difficult to ***do*** than it is to ***say***. To take the pain of loneliness and turn it into something rich and meaningful, may be literally miraculous... but turning to God often produces the miraculous. In order for us to turn our loneliness into solitude requires for us to know that we are never really alone.



Turning to God and trusting in His presence is always right, always good, and will result in fruit in our lives.

The third point is related, I'm calling it the **priority of the individual**. This call to solitude bears with it a very important assumption: that God is there for us individually and wants us to love Him, and listen to Him, individually. This call to solitude comes with the implicit Truth that God cares for each of us.



It is such a simple Truth that I'm almost embarrassed to make a point of it... **almost** embarrassed. I know that each of us may wonder from time to time if God could possibly care about us individually. He does. This call to solitude is call to each of us for God to speak to us, to go way deeper than our shiny exteriors and get to our hearts.

Remember what George read to us from the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel? In the context of Samuel anointing a king for the nation of Israel and Samuel looking first at the eldest brother, rather than the boy David:

The LORD said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things human beings look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."²

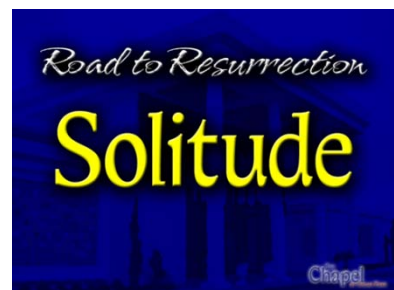
Our shiny exteriors, or especially our dingy and marred exteriors, mean nothing to God; He looks at the heart.

This great Truth of God's care for each of us individually serves as the basis for our care for individuals. With Our God caring so desperately for each person, we have no choice but to care too... especially for the weak and helpless. This is the motivation for the kinds of things we see on this church campus today. As you drove in you must have noticed the "Cemetery for the Innocents" cross memorial in remembrance of the approximately 3,800 unborn who have lost their lives each day in our country since 1973.

If one doesn't believe that those individual lives are important to anyone, including God, then the 3,800 abortions that, on average, occur every day are simply medical procedures. But if you believe, as I do, that life begins at conception... then these are individuals loved by God that also deserve our love and protection.

Each life is cared for by God. You are cared for by God.

So how should we pray today? It seems pretty evident to me... allow me to lead you in joint solitude. Listen to God. Sense His presence and care. Silence your inner voice and allow God to speak to you, individually today.



² *The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). 1 Sa 16:7.