

## The Joy of Solitude

This morning we hear the familiar story of Jesus feeding the 5,000. As I pondered this text once again, what struck me this time around was the little detail found right at the beginning. Before the actual miracle took place, Jesus invited His disciples to a deserted place to rest. This was not the first time He had done so nor would it be the last. I am not really sure why this obscure detail caught my eye, but I have spent the better part of the week thinking about it. For you see, while on this earth our Lord taught us many things, but one of those things was the value of solitude. We don't usually think of this as a lesson worthy of our attention. After all, we usually equate solitude with an unfortunate circumstance to be remedied rather than as a blessing to be pursued. But when we survey Jesus' public ministry, one of the things that strikes us is how often Jesus escaped from the crowds and sought solitude to pray, to think, to rest. Given all that Jesus had come to earth to accomplish this seems rather odd, doesn't it? And yet, the Scriptures tell us that Jesus repeatedly sought time alone. Why would He do such a thing? I would argue that Jesus withdrew often to lonely places so that He could better do what His Father had asked Him to do; that is, His time alone was instrumental to His purpose of accomplishing our salvation. Silence and solitude were imperative to the success of His Divine mission. So, as imitators of Christ, we do well to observe this often-overlooked practice. For no one could ever argue that Jesus didn't have enough to do. Healing the brokenness of mankind is His eternal business and there's no shortage of opportunity. If Jesus managed to find the time, so should we. Then why don't we? We know the answer: our lives are way too busy, way too important, way too complicated, that's why. We live at a frantic pace and our frenzied schedules seem to leave little time for silence or solitude or reflection. But this is far from being a good thing. We rush through the things of this life and rarely enjoy the blessings God has provided. We get up earlier and earlier, we go to bed later and later, because there doesn't seem to be enough hours in the day. We are weighed down by the burden of what we have failed to say no to, and so our lives are maxed out.

The sinful inclination is that all too common misconception that a busy person is an important person, and we all want to be important. If you want to get ahead in this life you have to be farther along than the person beside you, right? And so, what do we do? We rush to pass our neighbors by any means necessary. But to what end? Sure, this might make us the envy of our neighbors, but at what cost?

We pay the price in the form of busy, hectic, cluttered, stressed-out lifestyles. Now I am not denying there is much to do in this life, but it all depends on how we do it. Here we must examine the life of Christ. For in Christ, we see a life that was wisely paced. Jesus was busy, but never frantic. Christ calls us to slow down with Him; If we want to follow Christ, we cannot go faster than Christ desires to lead us. Christ invites us to walk with Him at a leisurely pace precisely because there is much to see along the path of life, as well as much to be missed if we move too quickly. Solitude is meant to slow us down, to quiet our lips and hearts, to help us gain perspective. In solitude, we can gain freedom from the sinful pressures of society that otherwise seek to consume and dominate us. In times of solitude, we are able to take stock of our lives. And the purpose of such self-reflection is so that we can be attentive to God's way of doing things. We seek to conform our natures to His Nature. And the true Nature of God is stillness. We move because we are restless. We move because we are afraid of missing out, of being left behind, of being overlooked. We move because we don't really know where we are going and we think doing something is better than doing nothing. But we are wrong about this. God, on the other hand, is still. He is eternally at rest. This does not mean He is inactive, but it does mean that His every movement must be understood within the larger pattern of peaceful repose. What's more, God's stillness is intimately connected to His love. You cannot understand God's love without pondering His stillness. Because, the unfortunate result of a frantic life is an inability to love fully. A rushed person has a tough time loving anyone else other than himself. A hurried lifestyle causes fatigue, which leaves a person too tired for anyone or anything

else. This, of course, is a recipe for failure making us unable to develop meaningful relationships with others, which is exactly what God warns against in asking us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

One last thought for you this morning: just because you are alone does not mean you are practicing solitude, and conversely just because you are with others doesn't mean you can't practice solitude. Solitude is more a state of mind, a rhythmic pace of the heart, than it is a physical location. There is a solitude of the soul that can be maintained at all times. True solitude is an inward repose in the goodness of God; an attentiveness to the quiet whispers of the Divine. The fruit of solitude is not to make us antisocial or hermit-like recluses. Just the opposite. The fruit of solitude is an increased sensitivity and compassion toward others hence why immediately following His solitude, Jesus fed the 5,000 on the hilltop. Having dwelt with God in silence there comes a new freedom to be with other people. For in solitude, we commune with the Divine and learn from our Savior that this life holds very few things genuinely worth having, and if you possess them then nothing else matters. But if you don't possess them.... well, everything else is worthless. Amen.

In Christ,

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