

Seeking Solitude and Silence in a Culture of Hurry

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 22 September 2024

Preacher: Rev. Jonathan St. Clair

[0 : 00] We hope that you enjoy this teaching from Christ Church. This material is copyrighted and no unauthorized duplication, redistribution, or any other use of any part is permitted without prior consent from Christ Church.

Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's scripture reading is Psalms 131, 1-3, and Luke 5, 15-16.

A reading from the Psalms. My heart is not proud, Lord. My eyes are not haughty. I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me.

But I have calmed and quieted myself. I am like a weaned child with its mother. Like a weaned child, I am content.

Israel, put your hope in the Lord both now and forevermore. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.

[1 : 16] A reading from the Gospel according to Luke. Yet the news about him spread all the more so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses.

But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed. This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.

All right. Good morning, Christ Church. We're in this new sermon series over the past three weeks called The Holy Habits of Grace.

And the driving question of this series is, how do I grow in the Christian life? How do we develop? How do we mature in the Christian life?

If Jesus is who he claimed to be and if he did all the stuff that the New Testament says that he did. And for some of us, that's a big if. You know, you're here exploring Christianity and we're really glad that you're asking your questions.

[2 : 21] But if you are here and you've trusted that Jesus is in fact the eternal son of God who became flesh. He died for the sins of the world on a Friday. He was raised from the dead on Sunday.

He's seated on God the Father's throne. He's ruling over all things. He is right now building and protecting his church through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit throughout the world.

And that he's coming again to raise us from the dead and to judge all the peoples of the world. And to bring the kingdom of God on the earth finally, fully, and forever. If you believe all the things that Christians believe about Jesus and you rest your life on these truths about his person and his work.

Then the question is, how should we order our time? How should we direct our energy with respect to these things? To put it a little bit differently.

If we've been externally called by the gospel. And if we've also been internally called and regenerated by the Holy Spirit. If we've received this gift from God of faith and repentance.

- [3 : 31] And we've been justified by God. And we've had the righteousness of Christ put over us. And we've been adopted by the Father as precious daughters and treasured sons.
- We've been united to Jesus Christ. We've been filled with the Holy Spirit. We have an assurance that one day we're going to be glorified before God in the new creation. Again, some of you, that's the first time you've ever heard about any of those things.
- And you're here to explore them and ask if those could possibly be true. But all that I just described is what's true of a Christian. And so if that's true for you.
- If this has happened to you by God's grace. And if you're just shocked to be here today. You're shocked that of all people, you're a Christian. And you know yourself to be more flawed and more sinful than you ever dared believe.
- And yet also more accepted and more loved than you ever dared imagine. If all that's true. And you notice in yourself as a result of these things new life.
- [4 : 37] New desires. A new sense of hunger and thirst. That you want to be with Jesus. And you want to become like Jesus. You want to do the things that Jesus did.
- What next? What should we do with that? How do we grow in the Christian life? How do we mature and develop as Christians? And what we're suggesting in this sermon series is that we really ought to give our time and our energy to these holy habits of grace.
- Now I saved you the time and the trouble this week by skimming seven books that were published from the year of my birth, 1978, to today.
- And the subject of all these books is the same. It's the practices. The predictable patterns. The habits. The rhythms. The disciplines of the Christian life.
- And I look for what do all these seven books have in common? What do they all say is essential for growing the Christian life? And we have a slide, I believe. If we can pull that slide up.
- [5 : 44] And we'll just, you're going to see this hopefully a lot over this coming series. These are all the things that the book said. That need to be a part of our regular life.
- Daily, weekly, or monthly. If we're going to grow in the Christian life. And I would say that in the digital age with, you know, the infinity of our computers in our pockets.
- And the worldwide web at our fingertips 24-7. I would say that this holy habit of solitude and silence at the very top should be at the top.
- It should have priority and primacy in our lives. And hopefully you'll understand that as we go along this morning. But we're going to allow Psalm 131 to open up this first essential spiritual practice for us.
- And we're going to talk about three things over the next few minutes. We're going to talk about a weaned child, a calmed and quieted soul, and a mature life with God.
- [6 : 46] All right? So a weaned child, a calmed and quieted soul, and a mature life with God. A weaned child. That's the primary metaphor in the Psalm 131.
- And a great preacher from London, Charles Spurgeon, he said this. He said, Psalm 131 is one of the shortest psalms to read. But it's one of the longest to learn and to experience.
- As we saw in Psalm 1 a few weeks ago, it begins with a series of three negatives. These three convictions about who I'm not going to be and how I'm not going to live. I'm going to walk not, stand not, and sit not.
- You remember that? Well, Psalm 131 begins very similarly. He says in verse 1, My heart is not proud, Lord. My eyes are not haughty. I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me.
- My heart and my eyes represent my inner life and my outer life. With my heart, I think and I know reality. With my eyes, I visualize things and I perceive reality.

[7 : 53] And the psalmist is saying, My heart is not me-centered and self-preoccupied. And my eyes are not arrogant and presumptuous. And all that human self-reliance that we see out in the world, he says, All that that displeases God, I reject.

And then he says this. He says, I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. And this is not anti-intellectualism. It's not a discouragement from developing the life of the mind or pursuing knowledge and discovery and breakthrough in various fields of research.

If you came to our Cal Scholars Series last week, God and the Created Order, we had like 45 people here after church talking about the difference between pure math and applied math and how that relates to the mind of God.

So we're going to do that with biology and chemistry and philosophy. We could do that with all of your disciplines. So this is not about anti-intellectualism. What is it about?

What are the great matters that the psalmist says I've not concerned myself with? He's talking about that which is above and beyond the realm of human knowledge. He's talking about those profound, mysterious things that are known only to God.

[9 : 09] I think about Deuteronomy 29. It says this, The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.

The psalmist is saying instead of a restless discontentedness and feeling like I need to meddle with God's affairs that are way above my head and way above my pay grade, I'm just content for God to be God.

I'm content with the fact that there are just secret things that only God can comprehend that I am never going to understand. And basically in this moment he's saying, I surrender.

I've surrendered to the fact that I am a finite and limited, feeble and frail, dependent and humble creature before my transcendent and glorious creator God.

And the question this psalm provokes for us is, have you surrendered? Have you opened your hands like that to God and said, I surrender? And then he goes on.

[10 : 20] Like Psalm 1 gives us these three negatives, walk not, stand not, sit not, and then says, blessed is the one who delights in the law of the Lord and meditates on his law day and night.

Psalm 131 does something very similar. It says, my heart is not proud, Lord. My eyes are not haughty. I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. But here's the positive.

I have calmed myself and quieted myself. I am like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child. I am content. The mother is this life-giving, life-nourishing figure.

And the mother-child relationship is one of great intimacy and care. Right? So think about your children or think about when you were a child. In the heart of a child, in the eyes of a child, mom is very big.

Mom is the most important person in the world. And so it's a very big deal when mom decides to wean the child from milk to solids. Fortunately, this is before my conscious memory.

[11 : 28] But I know it's difficult. And the psalmist is asking us to think about that. What's the difference between a nursing child and a weaned child? Well, what's a nursing child like when they're hungry and they're tired?

Maybe we should have some parents come and give testimonies this morning. They're squirming and they're squealing. Right? They're disturbed and distressed. They're anxious and they're restless and they're frustrated and they're struggling.

And this nursing child is just forcing its way to mom with this urgent impetuosity and loud cries, demanding satisfaction in my vital needs right now. That's the nursing child.

What's the weaned child do? The weaned child has learned to wait calmly and quietly and patiently until the proper time. Right? The weaned child says that moms, I know that mom's love and mom's constancy is stuff that I can trust and I can rely on with my whole being and my whole life.

The weaned child has come to terms humbly and submissively with the fact that mom knows what we need and when we need it. And she's going to make sure that we're going to get everything necessary for life.

[12 : 45] Our food and our protection. Our care and our consolation. The weaned child has made this transition from protest and indignation and restlessness to this calm and quiet trust and restfulness.

The weaned child has become just a little bit less me-centered and a little bit more mom-centered. The weaned child is not necessarily here to get something but to just enjoy someone.

Not necessarily to demand the gifts but to just enjoy the giver. The weaned child is content to just be with his mother, enjoying her closeness and her love without demanding anything else.

And I love this quote from a German commentator on the Psalms. He says, The Christian is not like an infant crying loudly for his mother's breast, but like a weaned child that quietly rests by his mother's side, happy in being with her.

No desire now comes between him and his God, for he is sure that God knows what he needs before he asks him. And just as the child gradually breaks off the habit of regarding his mother only as a means of satisfying his own desires and learns to love her for her own sake.

[14 : 10] So the worshiper after a struggle has reached an attitude of mind which, here it is, in which he desires God for himself and not as a means of fulfillment of his own wishes.

His life center of gravity has shifted. He now rests no longer in himself but in God. We so often approach God only for what he can give to us rather than this more mature approach that we're presented here of simply enjoying his presence and joyfully content just to be with him.

And so this list of holy habits, we're not doing that just to like lay more things on you. Actually, we're hoping to take some things off of you in this sermon series and to give you life. And these are the means, these are the tools that are going to enable you and equip you to enjoy God more.

Which is the whole point of this great image of the child with his mother. You with me? The weaned child? It's a beautiful, amazing image.

The weaned child. And I want to think a little bit more together about this phrase, a calmed and quieted soul. A calmed and quieted soul. Last week we looked at Psalm 42 and 43 and those words that we just sang a minute ago.

[15 : 33] Why my soul are you downcast? And the psalmist says, soul, put your hope in God. It's like he sees his soul as a distinct entity that he can talk to and that he can work with and work on.

And Psalm 131 is the same. And here's a bit of a different translation so it maybe hits you at a different angle. Here it is. Truly, I have brought my soul to stillness and silence.

Like a child cuddles itself to its mother, so is my soul with God. Isn't that beautiful? I think it's beautiful.

Thank you. I'm glad you're listening. If we hope to calm and quiet our souls before God, if we hope to bring our souls to stillness and silence in his presence, we've got some work to do, honestly.

And what I want us to think about over the next few minutes is just to scrutinize for a second how we engage with our technology vis-a-vis the calmness and quietness of our souls and how we prioritize and manage our time vis-a-vis the calmness and quietness of our souls.

[16 : 50] And I'm hoping you might walk away today with a list of a couple things that you sense God wants you to stop doing with your technology and with your time in order that you can have a calm and quieted soul.

So I'm just going to give you a brief diagnosis of the problem, and this is all footnoted in a great book called The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry. Thanks to John Mark Comer for doing all the homework for us.

But that book argues that, of course, technology can be used for good, but that it can also destroy our soul, and it's destroying our souls. It's destroying our relationships with God.

The average iPhone user touches their phone 2,617 times a day and is on their phone 2.5 hours over a series of 76 sessions.

And a study of millennials put the number at two times what I just told you. And so the question is immediately, like, what would my life be like if God touched my mind as frequently as I touched my phone?

[17 : 51] One study says that just being in the same room as your phone, even if your phone is turned off, quote, will reduce someone's working memory and problem-solving skills.

If you grow dependent on your smartphone, it becomes a magical device that silently shouts your name at your brain at all times. So much time is lost in the black hole of our phones.

In fact, our phones are black mirrors when you think about it. They're these black mirrors, and we stare into them, and they reflect our image back to us, and we bow down to it for, like, hours at a time.

And that adds up, actually, if you were to calculate it, to a huge amount of time in a given day or a given week. Much of this technology has been, as we know, it's been created to exploit the vulnerabilities in our human psyches.

Multi-billion-dollar companies are asking the question, either right now or tomorrow morning, how can we consume and sell as much of Jonathan's time and conscious attention as he will give to us?

[18 : 57] And we become addicted to these dopamine dispensers in our pockets and the whole ecosystem of interruption technologies that they represent.

And here's what's happening to your brain. Here's what's happening to your neural pathways, that as these things control our attention, they chip away at our capacity to focus, to concentrate, and to contemplate.

A goldfish has the attention span of nine seconds, and an iPhone user, your average iPhone user, is beat by the goldfish by about one second, which doesn't bode well for preaching either.

It's tough. Continuous partial attention has become the new normal in our society and in the church. And we're not even talking about the fire-breathing dragon of our streaming devices today.

I'm not just going to leave that over here. Your phone says to you, you can be in two places at once, but in reality, you're at no place at all. Your phone says to you, you can be present everywhere, but in reality, you're present to no one.

[20 : 04] You're present nowhere. We have given ourselves willingly over to paying attention to distractions rather than paying attention to the most important things in our lives.

First of all, God. Second of all, each other. This is where you should say amen. Amen. Okay. Gosh, I got to work on you guys.

So I want to give you some suggested prescriptions for how to calm and quiet your souls with respect to your technology. And I think about these as habits of resistance or anti-habits.

And so here they go. You just, whichever one works for you, just go with it. Turn off the notifications on your phone. Right? That's number one. Number two, turn off your phone for one hour a day.

If you really want to be radical, don't look at or touch your phone for the first and last hour of your day. In fact, put your phone to bed before you go to bed and you wake up before your phone wakes up.

[21 : 10] And do not let your phone sleep in your bedroom. And if you want to be an extremist, not only start it in your day for the first hour without your phone, but turn your phone off for that hour when you get home from work.

And here's the reason why. Blaise Pascal, great mathematician, philosopher, and theologian, he said, all man's problems stem from his inability to sit quietly in a room alone.

We don't have the ability to do that anymore. And therefore, we have so many problems that are completely unnecessary problems. So what about the problem of our time?

How do we prioritize and manage our time so that our souls can be calmed and quieted? All of us are plagued by this hurry sickness where we're chronically short of time.

We're continually rushing and anxious. We're flustered when we encounter any kind of delay because we've built in zero margin into our lives. We're just in this continuous struggle and this unrelenting attempt to accomplish or to achieve more and more things or to participate in more and more events in less and less time.

[22 : 21] The Apostle Paul wrote this in Ephesians 5 to Christians 2,000 years ago in a city, the city of Ephesus. He said, look very carefully at how you live.

Look very carefully at how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time because the days are evil. And I think if the Apostle Paul were here, he would say to us that you have a spiritual enemy.

He is a dark power and he wants to use busyness and hurry and noise and crowds and distractions and overload to keep you from God and to cause you to settle for a mediocre version of the Christian faith.

And the solution to that over busy life is not magically to get 26 hours in the day. Nobody can add that on. It's just simple. It's to do what we're doing in this series, to simplify our lives back down to the essentials and then to organize our time around what really matters.

And what does that mean practically? Well, for example, instead of one hour of TV before bed, you could actually read through the entire Bible in six months with that time.

[23 : 40] Or another example, instead of 20 minutes on social media in the morning, you could pray for every single one of your friends and family members and probably half of this church in that time.

So here's what we're going to do. I'm going to stop preaching for a second. We're just going to pause for a moment. And I want you to listen to your heart. And I want you to ask your heart, what do I sense the Holy Spirit speaking to me right now that he wants me to stop doing with my technology and with my time?

And whatever that first thing is that just popped into your head, write it down. Write down whatever that thing is. And then next to that thing, I want you to write down the name of the friend that you're going to tell about that thing that just came into your mind.

And then next to that name, I want you to write down when you're going to stop. Like today or tomorrow or Wednesday after dinner or whatever. And then here's the deal. Go home today, tell your friend, and stop.

What's the goal of that? What's the goal of these anti-habits and these habits of resistance? It's this. Truly, I have brought my soul to stillness and silence. Like a child cuddles itself to its mother, that is my soul with God.

[25 : 04] And we're never going to experience the fullness of what that means unless we get a handle on our technology and our time. Here's the last thing I want to talk about is a mature life with God.

A mature life with God. And this comes out of verse three. It says, Israel, put your hope in the Lord both now and forevermore. The psalmist is inviting and challenging all the people of God to make his experience with the Lord their fundamental way of life.

He says, I want you to hope in and trust in the Lord with me. I want you to give up your reliance on yourself and I want you to rely on the Lord alone with me.

I don't want you to lift up your heart in pride. I don't want you to raise your eyes in arrogance as if we control the world. I'm asking you to come and just rest in the arms of the Lord with me because the Lord knows all that we need and he will provide it.

So the psalmist says, trust him. Hope in him. And he says, do it now. Do it today. Do it from this time forth. Do it from this beginning point on.

[26 : 13] And as we get to the New Testament, we realize that really there was only one Israelite who fully and consistently and comprehensively embodied this hope in the Lord perfectly.

And so I just want to take a look for a moment at Jesus and his practices of solitude and silence that enabled him to put his hope in God the Father.

When we think about Jesus' holy habits, when we think about his predictable patterns, he was strengthened daily in solitude with his Father. Every day he began his day seeking out what he calls in his teachings the secret place or the solitary place.

And he did that not as an activity done for its own sake, but he did it in order to give himself access to the Father's presence and power and to bring himself into more effective alignment and cooperation with the King of the universe and his kingdom and so that Jesus could live out of and operate out of the fullness of the Father's life and the wholeness of the Father's will.

And if Jesus needed to do that, how much more do we need to do that? So how did he do it? How did he seek that external solitude so that when he entered back into the noise and the hurry of life and the crowds, he remained in that place of inward heart solitude?

[27 : 38] How did he do it? Well, here's some examples in the Gospels. In Mark chapter 1, we find this one long chapter about Jesus' first day on the job as the Messiah and it's an absolute marathon.

He's up early teaching in the synagogue and then he goes and has lunch and he heals a woman over lunch and then late that night, he's up, you know, healing the sick and the demonized who've been brought to him and so he's probably pretty exhausted at the end of the day and it says in Mark 1 31, it says, very early in the morning while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, a calm and quiet place where he prayed.

In Mark chapter 6, we learn about the disciples. They've been sent out by Jesus on a mission. They return from that. It's been physically demanding. It's been spiritually taxing and it says this in Mark 6, it says, the apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught and 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 solitary place, to a calm and quiet place and get some rest.

Shortly after that, he taught the 5,000 and he fed them with the loaves and fishes and it says in Mark 6 45 that after he'd taken leave of the crowds and of his disciples, he went up alone by himself on a mountain where he prayed.

Our text from Luke 5 today is after Jesus healed a man with leprosy and it says, the news about him spread all the more so that the crowds of people came to hear him and be healed of their sicknesses but Jesus, it says, he often withdrew to solitary places, to calm and quiet places where he prayed.

[29 : 34] And even as Jesus was preparing for his highest and holiest work the night before his crucifixion, where did he go? He went to the garden of Gethsemane for solitude and silence and it says in Luke 22 that Jesus went out to that place as usual, as was his custom, as was his habit.

You know, people were clamoring for Jesus' attention all the time. they wanted his help all the time. We can barely imagine what that must have been like. And he also had the ability to help every single person who came to him and yet, he disciplined himself with this holy habit of withdrawing to these solitary and calm and quiet places with his father and that is how he was so grounded and so centered.

It's how he stayed connected to God and to himself, it's how he remained clear about his identity and his mission, who he was and why he was there.

In the centuries after Jesus was resurrected from the dead, men and women over generations, they imitated this practice of retreat and return, withdraw and engage, solitude to serve and it changed the world.

And so the question for us is how is God calling you to purposefully abstain from interactions with other people in real life and online for this kind of temporary withdrawal and this strategic retreat just tomorrow?

[31 : 11] What does he want you to do tomorrow? What does he want you to do this week? People who have made the most rapid, consistent, and evident growth in Christ's likeness, they've developed this predictable pattern, this holy habit of daily calm and quiet time with God.

And I want to just give you four steps as I close, four baby steps for how you can do it. First thing is this. In the morning and at night, first thing and last thing of the day, just take a second and step outside and look up at the sky.

Notice what you see and say wow. Say thank you. Say help. Just sit there for a second and be with God.

Baby step number one. Baby step number two. If you can't spend an hour with God in the morning and if you think that's impossible, it's not impossible, but if you're not there, start with 10 to 15 minutes and just pray a psalm and go walk around the block and talk to God about what's on your heart, what the day is about.

If that's too much, start with five minutes. If that's too much, start with one minute. If that's too much, we just can't help you here. Baby step number three.

[32 : 34] Baby step number three is look for what I call little solitudes or little minute retreats when you're in the car and you're waiting for the bus and you're walking home and you're in line at the store and you would normally reach for that dopamine dispenser or you would normally turn on the TV or turn on the radio.

Instead, just draw your mind's attention back to God and give yourself a second to just be refreshed by His love for you and His grace in your life. And the third baby step is plan on your calendar one time a month, October, November, December, we'll just start there, to go and spend two to three hours of solitude with God one time a month.

If you have kids, trade off with your spouse, work it out with a friend. The main regret you're going to have after you do that is that you didn't start sooner. I promise you. And when you arrive in these little places of solitude that we're trying to claw back, okay, we're trying to claw back our time, we're trying to claw back our attention, and when you arrive in that place of solitude, allow your soul to settle into silence.

Allow yourself to stop listening to all the voices in your head and in your heart and instead, do what Colossians 3, 2 says, which says, set your mind on things above.

Concentrate your heart on God. I know our, we got an eight second, seven second attention span less than a goldfish, but use even that to concentrate your mind on God and just enjoy being with God.

[34 : 08] and then listen to God. Here's what we're gonna do. I'm gonna give us one minute of silence right now.

Just allow your soul to rest for a moment in the arms of God like a child rests in the arms of his mother, okay?

Okay? Let's do that now. Let's do that now.

Let's do that now.

Amen. Truly, I brought my soul to stillness and silence. Like a child cuddles itself to its mother, so is my soul with God.

[35 : 51] Israel, put your hope in the Lord both now and forevermore. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.