

Seeking Solitude

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[0 : 00] I just want you to think back to the words of the song we've just sung, and that, be still and behold him. Let's just encourage you to close your eyes and just hold those words in your heart for a moment.

Be still and behold him. Be still and behold him.

Thank you. Feel free to open your eyes again. Otherwise I might think you're all nodding off, which might be what you've got planned for the next half an hour.

But it's a great introduction to our subject today. So we're carrying on with our series on learning the unforced rhythms of grace, and today we're thinking about solitude.

And John's given me possibly the shortest passage or passages I've ever had to read at the start of a sermon, which means I can say more afterwards, which you may or may not think is a good thing.

[1 : 19] Anyway, but the verses are going to come up on the screen, so maybe, thanks Josh. He's ahead of me. So we've got a verse from Mark and then a couple of verses from Luke, which are saying similar things, although you see as we look at them, there's just slight differences, but the same emphasis.

So Mark 1, 35. It's headed, Jesus prays in a solitary place, and it says, And then Luke chapter 5, verses 15 and 16, talking about Jesus says, So just a little bit about the context of those passages. Although there's a similar theme, it's not the same incident. In the Mark passage, Jesus has been in Capernaum, and if you read the few verses leading up to that, you'll hear that the evening before, he'd healed many who were sick, and he'd driven out demons from many people.

And yet the next morning, the first thing he does very early is he gets up and he goes out of the house and finds somewhere quiet to go and pray. In Luke, the passage in Luke, it's a similar story, but not identical.

We're not given the precise location, but what we are told is that vast crowds had come to Jesus to hear him and to be healed. But Luke goes on to follow that by saying, Jesus often withdrew to a lonely place to pray.

[3 : 14] So we've got clear indications there that Jesus made it a regular habit to find somewhere quiet and peaceful to pray and to be alone with God.

So next slide, please, Josh. So, why practice solitude? Some people really like the idea of solitude, being on their own. Yes, I can see one or two heads nodding.

Yeah, I'm a solitude person. Some people loathe the idea of solitude. They really love the crowds and engaging with people. And that's a lot to do with the personalities that God's given us.

And both of those responses are fine. But there is still a place for solitude within the Christian life and within the Christian walk. So solitude, sorry for all the extroverts out there, but solitude is not actually an optional extra.

John Mark Comer, if you've read his book, and he talks a little bit about solitude, and he's talking about saints of old, and he's saying that it's one of the most foundational, maybe the most foundational of all the practices of Jesus.

[4 : 21] It's a really important aspect of our walk with Jesus. And it's not just for the introverts among us. And the danger is an introvert that you say, oh, great solitude, but actually you miss the spiritual dimension.

You know, so for extroverts, there's that, oh, do I really want to be on my own? And for the introverts, it's, I want to be on my own, but maybe we then, there's a risk that we're too much on our own and shut Jesus out.

Having solitude or practicing solitude is good for our mental, physical, and spiritual well-being. Most of us, however much we like being with other people, we find that we need to recharge at various

points.

And we know in terms of our mental and physical well-being, if we're just on the go all the time and we never practice solitude, we never stop, actually it's not great for us because eventually you burn out.

It's also really key to say that solitude, why should we practice solitude? Well, Jesus did it. You know, whatever reason, other reason I might give today or other reason that you might think of, if Jesus did it, then it's got to be something that we take seriously.

[5 : 28] We've been focusing on being with Jesus, becoming like Jesus, doing what Jesus did. Well, this is something that Jesus did and Luke makes it clear that this was a regular practice.

It wasn't just a one-off. We know that before Jesus started his three-year ministry, preaching and healing and so on, he went into the desert for 40 days.

He went to a place of solitude. It wasn't just to be without food for 40 days. It was a place of preparation, but it was a place of solitude. And all these disciplines that we've been talking about as we've been going through this series, so prayer and witnessing and service and so on, and now solitude, they're there to help us grow and mature in our faith.

It might be attractive to go for the ones that we sound the easiest or we think we're most likely to get better at, but actually if we only choose those ones, we're missing out and our growth may be stunted.

And we know actually that sometimes it's when we try and practice and work on the things that are most difficult that we grow the most because we have to put the most into it and we have to keep coming back to God and asking for him to help.

[6 : 45] Henri Nouwen said about solitude, without solitude, it's virtually impossible to live a spiritual life. There's a bit of a challenge there because we might think, oh, you know, I can spend lots of time doing things for God and we forget that place of solitude.

And what Henri Nouwen is saying is actually, if you do that, it's almost impossible to live a spiritual life. Okay, so next slide please, Josh.

What do we mean by solitude? Solitude. Well, I went to the dictionary. I like looking in the dictionary about things and basically the Oxford English Dictionary said, it's a state of being alone.

However, spiritual solitude is much more than this. It's not just about being alone. We can be alone and ignore God completely and that's not going to do us any good.

So spiritual solitude is much more than this. It's about being alone, but being alone with God, inviting God into that space of solitude. If you read Richard Foster's book, Celebration of Discipline, he talks about solitude quite a lot and one of the things he talks about is calling it an inward attentiveness.

[8 : 00] So we're taking space apart to be with God, but it's that inward attentiveness to God. We're not just scrolling through our phones or thinking about what we're going to cook for dinner or just zoning out for five minutes so we can get some peace and quiet.

It's about having an inward attentiveness to God, being aware of God's presence, being willing to listen to him and to speak to him and to hear from him. And that's why I wanted just to stop at the start of this sermon and focus on that.

Be still and behold him. And there's two parts to spiritual solitude. It's the being still, but it's also beholding him, focusing on God.

So if we're talking about inward attentiveness, we're choosing to withdraw from outward distractions, to focus on God and to enjoy being with him.

And that means solitude is actually primarily about our inward attitude rather than our physical location. Because one of the challenges to solitude is we say, oh, you know, I've got small kids at home, I'm running around after them all the time, how can I find solitude?

[9 : 12] Or I've got a really busy job or whatever. But if you read Richard Foster and other people who've written about it, it's about our inward attitude rather than a physical location.

And Richard Foster said, solitude is more a state of mind and heart than it is a place. So listen to that again. It's more a state of mind and heart than it is a place.

And there is a solitude of the heart that can be maintained at all times. If we think solitude is just about finding quiet space on our own, then we're going to struggle.

But if we remember it's about that focusing on God, then we can maintain that solitude. Okay, so let's look a bit about what solitude meant for Jesus.

Thank you. So Jesus had this amazing ministry in the last three years of his life on earth. And you'd think he'd always wanted to be busy healing people, speaking to people, reaching out to people.

[10:15] We know when we read the Gospels that Jesus was generous with his time and reaching out to people, particularly people on the edges of society. And yet Jesus still looked for that place of solitude.

For him, it was an opportunity to press pause on that busyness, that busy day-to-day ministry when people were sort of pressing against him all the time, wanting him to do this, that, and the other. Maybe sometimes asking him to do things that he hadn't been called to do, but people were always badgering Jesus. And he wanted that opportunity to press pause, find a space away from the hustle and bustle of the crowds.

His time alone with his father was vital to his ministry. He recognized that to do the things that God had called him to do, he needed to spend that time with God on a regular basis.

He couldn't just say, right, yeah, I know what I'm supposed to be doing and carry on doing it. He had to have that time of refreshing, of being with his father and communing with his father. And so he chose to prioritize solitude.

[11:20] He got up very early in the morning, which is a real challenge for some of us who like staying in the bed, particularly at this time of year when it's a bit cold and damp and dark outside. But it tells us that Jesus got up very early in the morning, left the house because he wanted to find a solitary place where he could be alone with his father.

And if we'd been the disciples, we might have been a bit surprised by that. You know, Jesus is this, you know, all these people, you didn't get around to healing yesterday, they're waiting for you. Or, you know, there's this crowd over here who want to know what you're going to say.

And if you read around those passages I read in Luke, you'll find that, you know, disciples saying, you know, where have you been? And here's these people that want to hear from you. But Jesus prioritized solitude.

And that's a real challenge for us because we can all get dragged astray by people's expectations. And often for good reasons, you know, we think we've got to do this, that and the other because, you know, God's called us to serve the church and to minister to others and to witness to others. But if that's just an endless cycle and we don't prioritize that time alone with God, that place of solitude, we're missing out and we're going to become weakened in our spiritual lives.

[12:31] It's also a regular practice for Jesus. It wasn't something he did. Just occasionally, you read through the Gospels as other instances of Jesus taking time to be on his own and focusing on God.

When he was in Gethsemane, he spent time with his father. He had three of his disciples close at hand, although they were nodding off, but he spent that time with his father. He made it clear, sorry, he made it his regular practice to spend time alone with his father, just as he had in the wilderness, but throughout his ministry.

And if it was a regular practice for Jesus, then surely it should be something for us as well, having that space of solitude. Solitude. So what does solitude look like for us?

I think it's really important to say that it might look different for different people. If you read Richard Foster's book, *Celebration of Discipline*, it's a great book and there's lots of encouragement there about how you can grow in your faith, but it's pretty hard going at times.

So when he talks about solitude, he talks about, you know, and a lot of writers talk about solitude and silence sort of linking together. He says, you know, maybe spend a whole day in silence. Now, I'm not the most talkative person in the world, but spending a whole day in silence sounds pretty tough.

[13:51] And then he talks about going off for a period of a few days to be in silent space with God. But that really works for Richard Foster and I'm sure for a lot of Christians, but it might not work for us.

We need to work out what solitude looks like for each one of us so we can learn from each other.

There's lots of writings around it. You can learn from what other people do, but don't assume because somebody else is doing it different from you that you've somehow got it wrong.

It also may change depending on what season of life we're in. I've been reading this book. I was asked to review this coincidentally, but it's a great, it's called *Reclaiming Quiet*.

It's a great book about just finding that place of solitude and I will be quoting this book later on. But it's by a lady called Sarah Clarkson. She has four small children.

So you can imagine, when you've got small children, solitude is not necessarily the word that comes first to mind or if you do find a bit of space when the children aren't there. I remember my children were small, you know, you tend to just nod off because you're so tired.

[15:03] So what solitude looks like depends on what season we're in. life we're in. And Sarah Clarkson has found ways that solitude works for her that fit around her children.

And her husband's a vicar, so he's pretty busy as well. But she's found that inward attentiveness that Richard Foster talks about. not that she'd say she's got it all sussed out, but that she's found what works in this season of her life.

And as we go through different phases of our life, whether at work or retired or whatever, have got children at home, family have left, we need to consider what does solitude look like for me in this season of life.

It talks about, or it looks like, having a deliberate inward attention to the things of God. And I think that word deliberate is really key here because I'm sure we all have good intentions about we want to spend time with God and we know that's important.

But then we get distracted by lots of different, well, I get distracted by lots of different things.

Perhaps you're all different from me, but I guess, if we're honest, we all get distracted and we have good intentions and then something grabs our attention and we forget to look at God.

[16:12] So it's that deliberate coming back to give God our attention. I think it's about prayer in its broadest sense. So sometimes it's easy just to rush into God's presence, but then we have a shopping, like a shopping list of prayers and we say, you know, please can you do this, can you do this, can you bless so and so and, you know, we can spend a long time praying, but actually it's just us telling God what we want him to do or what we think he ought to do sometimes.

But I think it needs to include listening and resting and I'm sure when Jesus was spending time alone with his father, it wasn't so he could have a shopping list of prayers, it was about he could enjoy being in his father's presence and he could listen to his father.

There's a lovely anecdote about Mother Teresa, which I might have quoted before, apologies if I have, but somebody asked her about prayer once, you know, what do you do when you're praying? And she said, I can't remember which way round it was, but she's saying, what do you do when you're praying? She said, I listen. And she said, and then somebody said, well, what does God do? And she said, he listens. And it was just that lovely image of God and Mother Teresa spending that time listening to each other, being together.

And I'm sure that for Jesus it was about listening to his father, spending time with his father, enjoying being with his father. It's about relationship rather than a transactional exchange, which is the sort of shopping list type of prayers.

[17:43] It's not always about finding a physical solitary space, although that often helps. Okay, so I'm sure when Jesus got out early, went out the house to solitary space, it's because he knew if he stayed in the house, you know, Peter would be saying, can you come and heal this person?

And James would be saying, that person needs to hear what you've got to say. You know, and they were great at introducing other people to Jesus, but actually what he needed to do was find that space. So it might be that we find it helpful to find a physical solitary space by going out the house, going for a walk, finding it, having a space in our own homes where we can be quiet.

And again, that could look different for each of us. But consider whether you can find a physical space to practice solitude. And it's important to say that being in solitude is not the same as loneliness.

And if we just feel lonely, then maybe we need to just direct our attention back to Jesus, ask him to speak to us and to be with us, to be still and behold him.

Okay, so confession time. What gets in the way of this? Because it's all very nice ideas about how solitude should look like, but in practice, we know that stuff gets in the way.

[19:03] Life gets in the way. Has anybody here ever said, once we get past, you know, the next couple of weeks are really busy, but once we get past that, it'll all settle down and I'll have time to do, you know, spend time with Jesus, you know, weed the garden, whatever.

Yeah? Yeah, I can see lots of nodding heads and hear a few laughs. I'm terrible for that, you know, I think, oh, you know, these next couple of weeks are really busy, but once we get to a week on

Saturday, you know, it all just calms down and then you get there and something else comes along and something else comes along and something else comes along.

Life is really busy and that can easily get in the way of us seeking that place of solitude because we just think, oh, just a little bit longer and then I'll be able to do it, just a little bit longer.

But if you look at Jesus, he was in the midst of a really busy time. You know, he could have been busy all the time, healing people, speaking to people, spending time with people and yet he prioritised taking that time out in solitude and there's a lesson for us there.

Not an easy lesson to learn sometimes, but a lesson or example the same. Okay, more specifically, what gets in the way, social media. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter or whatever it's called these days. [20 : 18] Lots of other things that I don't even understand how they work. It's not that these things are necessarily bad in themselves. You know, the advent of all this stuff, you know, WhatsApp is great for sharing prayer requests and just sharing good news around church and Facebook, we can do the same, we can share news and so on.

But actually, although they're not necessarily bad in themselves, they can be a huge distraction distraction and they can become quite addictive and it's really important that we monitor our social media use if that's something that maybe we struggle with and make sure that it's not getting in the way of our relationship with Jesus of spending that time in quiet because I know it's so easy to go and think, oh, I'll just sit down and be quiet for a minute or I'll just check Facebook or I'll just check the church WhatsApp group with the best intentions and all of a sudden it's 10 minutes late and you realise you've just spent 10 minutes scrolling.

Work pressures. Lots of us have busy jobs or lots of responsibilities. You know, even if you're at home with the children, you've got those work pressures looking after children, running around after them and those things can crowd in and we can get worried.

You know, I've got this situation at work, I don't know what to do about it and we worry about it and that becomes all-encompassing and it becomes another of those, once I get past this situation, I'll have time to sit down with God and we need to try and protect ourselves from those and make that decision to spend that time in solitude with God.

Family commitments again, you know, I love my family, I love spending time with my family but it's easy getting to that, well, we need to see so-and-so and we need to do this and again, it can become a distraction from spending time with Jesus and we know that Jesus is gentle and he doesn't nag at us in the way that maybe relatives do sometimes.

[22 : 18] So, it's important that we make sure that those family commitments, although they're important, don't get in the way. Procrastination. I'm not really in the mood to spending time with God today so I'll do it tomorrow when I'm feeling a bit better, you know, I had a bad night's sleep, you can't focus.

That's not how it should be but again, it's easy to put it off to a feeling in a better mood or, you know, till the weather's better or, you know, all the excuses we make.

Fear can get in the way of spending time in solitude. I think probably particularly for a person who likes noise all the time and likes that buzz of being with people, being just in quiet in silence and solitude with Jesus can feel a bit scary.

And that's okay, we need to acknowledge that. You know, and even as an introvert, you know, I like having time on my own but stopping and focusing on Jesus, you know, when I'm aware of all the things that maybe I could have done better for him this week, it can be scary but he doesn't want it to be like that.

We don't need to be scared to come to our Father. We don't need to be in a place of perfection or get all our attitudes right. We can spend that time in solitude with him. And also boredom or having a short attention span, you know, I'll sit here and I'll be quiet and I'll be in solitude with Jesus and I'll listen, oh no, you know, 10 seconds later, you know, I haven't heard anything, I'll get up and go and check my phone or something.

[23 : 49] We can have really short attention spans and that comes back to that deliberate, having that deliberate inward attention, deliberate listening to God.

Found a great quote, there's an article in the Guardian by a lady called Justine Toe who is Senior Fellow at the Centre for Public Christianity but this is an article she wrote for the Guardian about the fact that we're all so easily distracted and she was talking about social media particularly but I think it applies to lots of things in our life and she said the pull of our feeds reduces our capacity to be present.

Practicing relaxed attentiveness or prayer can bring us back to what really matters. Okay, so how can we create space for solitude?

Prioritise. There will always be other calls on our time headspace. You know, when the kids were little I thought once they grow up and go to school it'll all be easier but it wasn't, it was just a different set of challenges and then I thought well you know when they leave home obviously that's sad but I will have more time to myself there's other challenges and there will always be other calls on our time and also on our headspace so I'm the sort of person that even when I'm sitting down I think I'm being quiet my mind sort of goes all over the place and I think about that situation at work and you know how we're going to get the Christmas shopping you know there's always calls on my headspace so we need to keep prioritising.

Learn from others. So John Mark Comer writes a bit about solitude Richard Foster this lady Sarah Clarkson but there's lots of people writing about solitude and silence but we can also learn from each other so you know talk in your life groups what helps you prioritise that space of solitude.

[25 : 44] Read and listen to sermons and podcasts but don't let that become a substitute for solitude. so it's good to listen to sermons it's good to listen to Christian podcasts or worship music or whatever but sometimes we use that to fill the space when actually we should be listening to God.

Choosing to switch off say right actually I'm not going to look at my social media first thing in the morning you know I'm going to put my phone in a drawer till you know nine o'clock or whatever and I know that people do that say you know I'll put my phone in a different room or whatever whatever works for you but choosing to switch off from social media busyness when it's actually busyness that we don't really need.

I think it's important as well that we start small so I've talked about Richard Foster saying oh you can take a day to be quiet or take three or four days away well we could do that but chances are if you sort of go from nothing to 100 miles an hour in terms of solitude maybe that's a bad analogy but you get what I mean if we you know try and do too much too soon we get stuck we get bored we get frustrated so start small otherwise there's a danger we set ourselves up to fall Richard Foster talked about taking advantage of the little solitudes and he meant finding those spaces in the day when you can pause and direct your attention back to God so he used examples of things like when you're having that first coffee of the day or cup of tea in my case you know rather than checking your phone just to direct your attention to God when you're sitting in a traffic jam rather than muttering under your breath about the way other people drive direct your attention back to God I don't know why everybody else is laughing I thought it was just me that did that but find those little spaces in the day when you those small solitudes when you can direct your attention back to God you can be open to him speaking to you and maybe find or develop a quiet place designed for solitude and for silence you know if you know that when you're sitting down in the lounge you're just going to flick around the telly and you're not going to pay attention say right well I'm going to go and sit in a different room for ten minutes half an hour two days whatever but I'm going to invest in that solitude and if you can't find it in the house maybe go out go for a walk sit on Westcliff look at the sea and just practice that solitude with God

Teresa of Avila said settle yourself in solitude and you will come upon him in yourself so as we determine to spend that time in solitude we will find that we encounter God in that space so next slide please this week here's some things for you to think about practice pausing just as we did at the start of the sermon we said let's be still and behold him and we've closed our eyes closing your eyes can be really helpful I find just to focus on God to be still to invite him into that space with you that place of solitude choose to set distractions aside now be realistic if you've got small children you can't just you know sell them to somebody down the street you've got responsibilities but choose to set distractions aside work out the things that stop you from coming to that place of solitude with Jesus and then ask him to help you do something about those you might find it helps to be accountable to somebody else in the fellowship that's a big challenge and be expectant if we come to that place of solitude it's not so we can feel lonely or feel bored but let's expect to meet God to hear from him to sense his presence don't beat yourself up if you don't feel those things just keep on practicing that habit because the more you do the more you will hear him and sense his presence I just wanted to finish Josh if we can have the last slide so this is a quote from Sarah Clarkson and she talks a lot about quiet but it's in the sense of solitude she says we're invited to listen quiet is never something that begins with us so solitude although we have to make those

good decisions is not something that begins with us it's always a response to the loving words of our creator that great word spoke to us again when he took flesh entered the cacophony of a fallen world and with his own final words it is finished began the story of love again we enter quiet not just to hush our own voices but to hear his and in the hearing be saved

[30 : 49] Amen