

Solitude and the Restoration of True Community

With the witness of Scripture, the testimony of Church history, and the conviction borne by personal experience all whispering in my ears, I am convinced that the call to Christ-centered solitude is one of the most important and yet most misunderstood and neglected practices in the Church; particularly in the west; specifically with regards to the cultivation of true community. The impact of this neglect is deep and wide.

In this session we're going to look at the place of solitude in the midst of community.

I. THE DESTRUCTION OF TRUE COMMUNITY - GENESIS 2-3

25 The man and the woman were naked and were without shame.....6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. 7 Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. 8 And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. 9 But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" 10 And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself." 11 He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" 12 The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." 13 Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." (Genesis 2:25, 3:6-13)

- A. In Genesis 2:25 we see the definition of true community: "naked and without shame." Complete vulnerability, transparency, openness, and honesty; boldness, confidence, love, affection, kindness, tenderness, loyalty, gentleness.
- B. And in Genesis 3 we see this community destroyed. Satan deceived Eve and the human race plunged into the unknown horrors of depravity. The result of "the Fall" was four-fold:
 - 1. They hid themselves

2. They were afraid
 3. They covered themselves
 4. They blamed others for their own guilt
- C. The blood-bought, Spirit-wrought Church is God's strategy to restore that which was lost in the Garden. He desires true community based on vulnerability without shame. The unblushing promises of the Gospel revolve around the restoration of sin-stained rebels into the covenant family God whereby we experience His love and delight and not His anger and disappointment.
- D. Believers must pay close heed to the Biblical path of healing with regards to shame. Both solitude and community is the remedy.
- E. In solitude we hear the voice of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit declaring our belovedness. Community cannot meet this need. In fact community can compound the misery without it. In solitude we stand "naked" before God in the face of all the opposition from within (self hatred, shame, fear, insecurity) and without (demons, circumstances, persecution, opposition).
- F. In community we bring our full and settled hearts to truly care for the broke and lead them into the same healing embrace of God. Community has reached its fullest highest potential when it serves to encourage weak and fearful people to stand before God and man "naked and unashamed."

II. THE PLACE OF SOLITUDE IN COMMUNITY

Among the fallen sons of Adam we find in the life of Jesus a picture of what the restoration to the intimacy of Eden looks like. In Mark 1 we see Jesus engaging His community from the place of solitude:

32 That evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. 33 And the whole city was gathered together at the door. 34 And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons. And he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. 35 And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate/lonely place, and there he prayed. 36 And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, 37 and they found him and said to him, "Everyone is looking for you." 38 And he said to them, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I

may preach there also, for that is why I came out.” 39 And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons. (Mark 1:32-39)

- A. It is in the lonely place, where Jesus enters into intimacy with the Father that true community and true ministry is born. In the lonely place Jesus fleshes out the glory of unashamed intimacy with His Father like that which Adam and Eve experienced in Eden.
1. There in the stillness of the morning when no one else was around, and as Jesus experienced the blaring silence of solitude, the fire of true community was being kindled. Standing vulnerable before the One who called Him “beloved Son” Jesus’ was baptized in the love of His Father.
 2. Jesus would come down from the lonely place into the crowded and busy streets of the cities of Israel with a full and settled heart. He would return from solitude to love, lead, and live amongst the brethren to escort them into the silence themselves. He would share the life of God with them. He would speak to them what He heard His Father saying. He would declare to them what He saw the Father doing. And He would include them in the glorious fellowship of the God-head.
 3. The secret of Jesus’ ministry is hidden in that lonely place where He went to pray. And the secret to all true Spirit-wrought ministry is to be found there. The lonely is place is what distinguishes ministry from activity.
 4. “Somewhere we know that without a lonely place our lives are in danger. Somewhere we know that without silence words lose their meaning, that without listening speaking no longer heals, that without distance closeness cannot cure. Somewhere we know that without a lonely place our actions quickly become empty gestures. The careful balance between silence and words, withdrawal and involvement, distance and closeness, solitude and community forms the basis of the Christian life and should therefore be the subject of our most personal attention.” (Nouwen, *Out of Solitude*)
- B. The place of solitude protects us from the dangerous habit of evaluating our lives based on our outward contribution.

THE VALUE OF SILENCE AND SOLITUDE IN LIFE AND MINISTRY

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1. In solitude we hear the Father saying “I love you; regardless of your contribution; regardless of your accomplishments; regardless of your success; regardless of your failure. I am your Father.” We can’t do anything of any external or material worth in solitude. We can only be with God. This is why most people avoid it.
 2. If we don’t hear this affirming and affectionate voice, we will seek it in others around us. This is poison to community. And it’s subtle and mostly unobservable. At the heart of every broken community and broken life is groping for affirmation from people.
 3. Elderly people are often some of the most depressed people on the planet by virtue of the fact that at the end of the life they determine their value by what they did or did not do. And regardless of how much a person accomplishes in his or her life, success is often destructive to human heart. Because it never “settles” the issue of our worth. Success creates a vacuum that must be filled with more success. It never settles the question of our worth. And therefore it
 4. We want to build things, write things, do things, speak things, lead things, sing things, and
- C. Community is designed to be the *expression* of freedom. But all too often it is the expression of fear; fear of rejection based on failure.
1. In my experience the primary reason that authentic community is undermined is because of shame; self-imposes rejection because of failure. In an attempt to rid our hearts of shame we try to “accomplish” it away. But this never works. It only compounds our crisis and pushes us further into isolation away from the God who loves us and the brethren who can care for us.
 2. And the primary reason that shame continues to flourish among believers is because our accomplishments and contribution is the measuring stick by which we measure our worth. When we don’t hear the merciful love of our Father in secret we’re invariably forced to go to people to get what we crave. And we won’t get what we crave from people unless we perform to such a degree that their praise is deserved. Thus at the heart of our perception of our worth is merit. And THAT is a destructive delusion.

3. “When we have sold our identity to the judges of this world, we are bound to become restless, because of a growing need for affirmation and praise. Indeed, we are tempted to become low-hearted because of a constant self-rejection. And we are in serious danger of becoming isolated, since friendship and love are impossible without a mutual vulnerability. And so, when our actions have become more an expression of fear than of inner freedom, we easily become the prisoners of our self-created illusions.” (*Out of Solitude*)

IV. FOUNDATIONS OF COMMUNITY IN 1 JOHN

A. Fellowship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—

2 the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—

3 that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

4 And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. (1 John 1:1-4)

B. Walking in the Light

5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

6 If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.

7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

8 If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

10 If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. (1 John 1:5-10)

[**16** Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. (James 5:16)]

C. Loving our Brothers

11 For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.

12 We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous.

13 Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you.

14 We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.

15 Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

16 By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.

17 But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?

18 Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. (1 John 3:11-18)