

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. The impact of this neglect is deep and wide.

After looking at three examples of solitude in Jesus' ministry I want to address eight misconceptions about the call to solitude that we would rightly understand what it is and what it isn't.

## **I. THE PLACE OF SOLITUDE IN JESUS' MINISTRY - THREE EXAMPLES**

**40** Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them. **41** And demons also came out of many, crying, "You are the Son of God!" But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Christ. **42** And when it was day, he departed and went into a desolate place. And the people sought him and came to him, and would have kept him from leaving them, **43** but he said to them, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose." **44** And he was preaching in the synagogues of Judea. (Luke 4:40-44)

Outline of the text:

v. 40-41	Evening Ministry
v. 42	Morning Solitude
v. 43-44	Day Time Ministry

**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)

Outline of the text:

- v. 32-34 Evening Ministry: Preaching and Deliverance
- v. 35-36 Morning Solitude
- v. 37 The Pressure of the Demands and Expectations of People in Need
- v. 38-39 Afternoon Ministry: Preaching and Deliverance

**19** Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. **20** And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. **21** And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children. **22** Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. **23** And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, **24** but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. **25** And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. **26** But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, "It is a ghost!" and they cried out in fear. **27** But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid." (Matthew 14:19-27)

Outline of the text:

- v. 19-21 Day Time Ministry
- v. 22-23 Evening Solitude
- v. 24-27 Walking on Water

## II. ADDRESSING EIGHT COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT SOLITUDE

### A. **The call to solitude does not undermine the call to ministry - it strengthens it.**

1. In all of the passages above, Jesus' solitude is riddled throughout a grueling ministry schedule. It did not take the place of His ministry. It protected Him and empowered Him to labor day in and day out. We rarely consider the intensity of the 3 1/2 years of Jesus' ministry. Jesus needed solitude.
2. Many reject the call to solitude because they assume that if leaders encourage people to embrace solitude the community will become

passive about ministry and service. They assume that the community will turn inward and forsake those around them (evangelism, mercy ministry, etc.). There is no

3. Many leaders say “I can’t afford the time to embrace the call to solitude.” Jesus would say “You can’t afford not to.” The pressure from external ministry in any capacity is taxing on the human heart. Jesus was able to serve sacrificially with His time and energy because He had a happy heart.
4. Ministries that do not encourage solitude are doing a disservice to their community. Our impact in our cities will be undermined if we don’t carve out a secret place in our lives with the Father.
5. “It is quite understandable that most forms of ministry avoid silence [and solitude] precisely so as to ward off the anxiety it provokes.” (Henry Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*; p. 52)

**B. The call to solitude does not undermine the call to community - it strengthens it.**

1. Often when I mention solitude people respond by attempting to defend the Scriptural mandate of community. This shows that many believe the two to be mutually exclusive. But this isn’t true. We mustn’t separate what God has brought together.
2. Solitude is not being alone - it is being alone with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is the foundation of all true community. As my sons grow up, they will be strengthened and edified by being part of the family and being around me, their father, in family settings. But they *need* to spend time with me alone for their hearts to be fully alive. They *need* to feel that they are the center of my world and as valuable as the other siblings regardless of their achievements, contributions, and current struggles. This basic need cannot be met in a community/familial setting. It must be met in solitude with their father who loves them.
3. If solitude is not the well-spring of our community we will bring our emotional, spiritual, and physiological needs to the community to be met by those around us. But the community of believers cannot meet the

deepest and most basic needs. And if solitude is not a value to them they won't even be able to point them in the right direction! As a result, when they let us down we become embittered against the community and conclude that "the Church is a sham." This is the testimony of so many who have come near the Church. If leaders do not combat this false ideology about the nature of Biblical community they will pay dearly for it; as will the people they lead who will leave angry at them and at God.

4. Our ability to embrace the Second Commandment is strengthened or diminished by our embrace of the First. And our embrace of the First Commandment is determined by our experience of the familial love of God (Eph. 3:15-19). And our experience of the familial love of God was never intended to come in a community setting (as mentioned above). Therefore, if our needs are not met by our Father in secret, then we will not walk in the First Commandment loving Him in response. The result of this will be the forsaking or the abusing of the Second Commandment which will result in the damaging of the health of our communities.
5. When we come down from the "lonely place" to the community we (like Jesus) impart life to those around us. If we avoid the "lonely place" and remain in the "city" we will (ironically) become lonely and isolated to negatively impact the community and drain those around us.

**C. The call to solitude is not the same as isolation.**

1. We mustn't associate solitude with isolation. Solitude is a deliberate pursuit of God (with the people of the community in view). Isolation is a deliberate avoidance of God and people.
2. People who gravitate toward isolation, loneliness, and depression need healing. But their healing does not look like forsaking the call to solitude. It looks like their wounds being healed so that when they are alone with God they are strengthened, not diminished.
3. "The Desert Fathers did not think of solitude as being alone, but as being alone with God. They did not think of silence as not speaking, but as listening to God." (Henry Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*; p. 63)

4. In solitude we listen to God. In isolation we ignore Him. In solitude we lift our eyes to Him seeking to connect with Him. In isolation we avoid Him.
5. In solitude we think about the community around us with tenderness, affection, and meekness. In isolation we think about the community around us with fear, anxiety, insecurity, pride, and envy.

**D. The call to solitude is not to take the place of counseling, pastoral ministry, or community care.**

1. Counseling, pastoral ministry, and community care are all important, valid, and integral to the health of the Church. However, many of these things are abused in most communities and ministries because they are taking the place of personal active intimacy with God. And they exist to serve *that* end. And as we have already said, when this happens, community thrives.
2. The appropriate use of counseling, pastoral ministry, and community care should always encourage people to pursue solitude by identifying and removing the obstacles that stand in the way between the wounded individual and their loving Father.
3. “Pastoral counseling is the attempt to lead fearful [people] into the silence of God, and to help them feel at home there, trusting that they will slowly discover the healing presence of the Spirit.” (Henry Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, p. 55)
4. If pastors and leaders don’t have a vision to lead their people into the place of affectionate, God-centered solitude they are merely anesthetizing their pain.

**E. The call to solitude is for everyone of every personality type and gift mix.**

1. The fact that Jesus Christ engaged in consistent solitude in the midst of His ministry schedule is proof not only that it is important but that it transcends personality types and gift mixes. Jesus has the perfect personality and the best gift mix of anyone who has ever lived.

2. In my experience it has been the most socially gifted, extroverted, and driven people who have committed to solitude at the deepest level. This taught me that it is not for the introverts alone. This is not to say that introverts cannot embrace the call to solitude; it is evidence that it is for all. Many assume that only the people who like being alone or the people who are socially awkward are built for solitude.
3. Jesus, Paul, John the Baptist, King David, Moses and Joshua blow these stereotypes out of the water about personalities and gift mixes. Solitude is about the beauty of God, not the makeup of people.

**F. The call to solitude does not minimize our joy.**

1. For some reason people equate solitude with sadness. This is another stereotype that doesn't stand up when stacked against Scripture and Church history. Some of the most joyful, radiant, and attractive saints have been those committed to these values.
2. The most common objection I hear to this call to solitude goes something like this: "I'm just not like you. I can't spend hours a day doing nothing. That sounds dreadful. I'm an extrovert." These people view solitude as a sort of "Christian time-out" for being too much of a social butterfly. But this logic has faulty foundations. It assumes two things that aren't true: (1) That solitude requires hours a day. We'll return to this in the next point. (2) That time with their Father isn't enjoyable.
3. For John the Baptist his "joy was made full" by "hearing the voice of the Bridegroom." For Jesus, hearing that He was a "beloved son" in the Jordan was no doubt an echo of what He had always heard in secret. This was the reason He was and still is "anointed with the oil of gladness."
4. People aren't depressed because of solitude. Solitude has nothing to with it. Maybe because of isolation. But not God-centered solitude.

**G. The call to solitude does look the same for everyone.**

1. Every now and again the Lord wires someone to need, enjoy, and benefit from hours of solitude a day. But these people are rare. The majority of

people--including Jesus--needed it for an hour or two in the morning or evening to recharge and reconnect with their Father.

2. Do not let other people around you determine what you are called to. Ask the Lord. Be obedient to what He is asking of you. It may be 30 minutes each afternoon to go on a walk. It may be a closet. It may be an empty living room for an hour or two before everyone else in your house wakes up. It may look like driving to a location where you can sit alone.

H. **The call to solitude does not earn us anything from God - it enables us to experience to experience what has already been secured for us.**

1. Once when I spoke about the call to solitude someone came up to me afterwards saying: "I've believe in grace. And I've been saved by faith. I don't need to wake up early to earn or prove my salvation." My response was something along the lines of: "Solitude is where I enjoy and experience grace by faith and celebrate the wonder of the salvation that God has secured for me."
2. Solitude is where we make ourselves vulnerable to God in ways that we cannot be in the midst of others. It enables us then, in that weakness and dependence, to freely receive that which Jesus secured for His by His death.
3. Solitude is like a bonfire on a cold night. It is not wisdom to avoid it. I want to get as close as I can to the flames so that my heart is warmed.
4. "Silence [and solitude] is the discipline by which the inner fire of God is tended and kept aline." (Henry Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, p.45)