

Solitude Teaching 03:

Encounter With Our Enemy

Intro hook:

- Blaise Pascal - the 17th century French philosopher - once said:
 - “All the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber.”
- Rather than go into solitude, we turn to what he called “diversion” to distract ourselves from ourselves.
- And he said this in the 1600s, four centuries before the iPhone, Wi-Fi, or social media.
- “Diversion” is easier than ever before.
- But the fear of solitude is not a digital age thing, it’s a human thing. Some deep fissure in the human heart is scared to death of the quiet.
- Nietzsche, another philosopher around the same time as Pascal, but definitely not a Christian, said:
 - “When we are alone and quiet, we fear that something will be whispered into our ear, [so] we hate the silence and drug ourselves with social life.”
 - People, in his view, are at times a drug, a narcotic for our fear.
- In one study at the University of Virginia, participants were isolated in a room with no distractions and given a choice to be alone with their thoughts for 15 minutes or to push a button and receive an electric shock and get out early.
- Two-thirds of men and a quarter of women chose to be electronically shocked rather than be alone.
- One research scientist concluded: “Most people seem to prefer to be doing something rather than nothing, even if that something is negative.”
- Why is that?
- Why is it we avoid solitude and silence? Why is it we always have background music on? Or

the TV going in the living room? Or a podcast in our earbuds? Why is it the moment we have a breath, we pull out our phone?

- What is it we're so afraid of?
- As a kid, I used to get scared at night that there were monsters under my bed or in my closet.
- For many adults, solitude is the monster under the bed.

Seam: *But I hate to break it to you — not all of our fears are ungrounded ...*

Recap:

- We started last week with Henri Nouwen's idea that "solitude is not a private therapeutic place." It's not a day spa for the soul where introverted Christians go to chill. Rather, Nouwen called it "the place of encounter."
- We said there are three primary encounters we must face in solitude:
 1. An encounter with our self (and our pain)
 2. An encounter with our enemy
 3. And an encounter with our God
- Up next on the docket is an encounter with our enemy

Turn: *Please turn in your Bibles to Matthew 4.*

- Let's read the opening story of Jesus in the eremos ...

Matthew 4v1-11

- Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."
- Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

- Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written:
- *“He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”*
- Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”
- Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.”
- Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”
- Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

The place of strength:

- Notice verse 1:
 - “Then Jesus was led by the Spirit” — meaning, this whole story is at God’s initiative ...
 - “Into the wilderness” — and the word there in Greek is eremos, which, as we said, can be translated “the desert,” or “the deserted place,” or “the solitary place.”
 - “To be tempted by the devil” — that can be translated, “For the purpose of being tempted by the devil.”
- Do you find this story confusing?
- Why would the Spirit lead Jesus into solitude to be tempted by the devil?
- For years, this story made no sense to me.
- Because I read it this way: The devil comes to Jesus in his weakness — after forty days, all alone, with no food or water, in the dry, hot desert. Isn’t that like the enemy? To come after us when we are weak and tired and vulnerable?
- But the story clicked for me when I realized I had the whole thing backwards: The eremos isn’t the place of weakness. It’s the place of strength.
- After forty days in solitude, Jesus was at the height of his spiritual powers! Then and only then did he have the strength to defeat the devil.

Seam: *Now, this is not how most of us think about solitude — as the place we go to draw on God's power to defeat the devil — but it is how the early followers of Jesus thought about solitude.*

The desert fathers and mothers:

- Few people have ever taken the story of Jesus in the desert as seriously as the desert fathers and mothers, a group of very serious disciples of Jesus who lived over a thousand years ago.
- Let me give you a little backstory. The fourth century A.D. was a key inflection point in church history. That's when the Way of Jesus was legalized in the Roman Empire and, for the first time, Christians went from being a persecuted minority to a political majority. At first, everyone thought it was the best thing ever: no more dying in the arena, no more martyrdom. But then, cultural Christianity started to infect the church like a cancer. Compromise and corruption became widespread.
- In response, thousands of men and women left civilization behind and went off into the deserts of North Africa, Judea, and Syria ...
- But here's what I find interesting: Their paradigm for going into solitude was not sabbath rest; it was spiritual war.
- For them, the eremos wasn't the place you go to slow down, breathe, decompress, and reset your sympathetic/parasympathetic nervous system, though there is a place for all of that, 100%.
- But for them, it was the place you go to encounter your demons — literally.
- The biblical text they anchored their life in was Matthew 4. They said: Jesus went into solitude to face down the devil. As followers of Jesus, we should do the same.
- My point is, they did not go into the eremos to flee, but to fight.
- Not to escape, but to engage.
- Not to play defense, but to run offense.
- Over time, the desert fathers and mothers started monasteries and monastic orders that spread all over the world.
- A few years ago, my son and I were in Ireland, and we got a chance to visit Skellig Michael, which is a small island off the southwestern coast where they filmed the new Star Wars trilogy — it's the location where Luke Skywalker is hiding at the lost Jedi temple.

- In real life, it's not a Jedi temple, but a UNESCO World Heritage Site of an ancient Augustinian monastery. The stone huts on-site are over a thousand years old.
- The original monks named it "Skellig Michael" — Skellig is Gaelic for rock, and Michael after Michael the archangel in Revelation, because he does battle with Satan. They named it Skellig Michael because they went out there — to the westernmost point of the known European world — to fight back against the waters of chaos and face down the Satan himself.
- Like ya do.

Seam: *Is this how you think about solitude, silence, and stillness?*

Catch:

- I'm guessing not!
 - One of the reasons many people practice solitude once or twice and then abandon the discipline is because they go in expecting a kind of private spiritual wellness therapy, but when they arrive, it's more like a war zone.
 - To navigate the eremos, we need to listen to the wisdom of the desert fathers and mothers.
 - They came up with a paradigm that I find very helpful. They said when you go into solitude, you encounter what they called "the three enemies of the soul."
 - Which were kind of like an unholy trinity, at war with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
 - The three enemies are:
 - The world
 - The flesh
 - And the devil
1. The world is the system of ideas, values, practices, and social norms of a sinful society.
 2. The flesh is our base, primal, animalistic drives for self-gratification, especially in regards to sexuality and survival. It's our lust, our greed, and our fear.
 3. And the devil is not just a personification of evil, but a real spiritual being who is the animating force of evil in our soul and society. At war with all that is good, beautiful, and true.

- When we go into solitude, we encounter all three enemies.
- We encounter the world — when we get a little distance from the noise of the world, we begin to realize just how many of the norms of our sinful society we have come to accept, how compromised our heart is, how we've lost our convictions ...
- We encounter the flesh — the bent, warped desires in our own heart and body itself all come up ...
- And we encounter the devil — as demonic thoughts assault our mind.

Seam: *Now, you may be thinking, really? We do? I've been in solitude and, for me, it was just a lot of chatter in my head. Exactly.*

The mind:

- The desert fathers and mothers offer this insight, based on the story of Jesus in Matthew 4.
- They point out that Jesus' fight with the devil is not like a scene out of a Marvel movie, with Jesus flying around like Thor battling it out with Thanos.
- Rather, it's a quiet conversation in his mind between the truth of Scripture and the lies of the evil one.
- They saw the fight with the three enemies of the soul as primarily a war in our mind with evil thoughts.
- One of my favorite desert fathers was Evagrius of Pontus, also known as "Evagrius the Solitary." He wrote a book called Talking Back: A Monastic Handbook for Combating Demons — best subtitle ever!
- In it, he made the point that Jesus refused to get sucked into debate or dialogue with the devil. Instead, when the lies of the evil one came into his mind, he just changed the channel. He redirected his attention to the truth of Scripture ...
- That was Jesus' strategy.

Seam: *But to get victory over the three enemies of the soul we - like Jesus - have to go into solitude.*

When we go...

- When we go into the eremos — whether we go away on a silent retreat at a monastery or, like one person I know, on an annual weeklong solo canoe trip in the backcountry ... or just get up early before our kids or roommates, put our phone away in a drawer, and sit on the floor and pray ...
- Something happens in solitude. With distance from the world, we begin to see clearly all the ways our heart has been caught up in the world.
- And we start to get free of the tangled web of lies and deception and temptation that play in our mind...
- But this is not easy.
- The biographer Mark's version of the Jesus in the wilderness story is much shorter, he just writes:
 - "At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him." (Mark 1v12-13)
 - Notice when Jesus went into the wilderness, he had to face down the wild beasts.
 - So too, we have to face down all our demons.
- But as long as we stay tethered to our world of "diversion" — all the noise and crowds and entertainment and doom scrolling that keep us from ever facing the dark underbelly in our own soul — we remain in bondage and never get free.

Seam: *This is why the three enemies — all three, the world itself, the flesh, and especially the devil — do everything they can do to keep us away from the eremos.*

The resistance:

- I call it "the resistance."
- Ruth Haley Barton writes:
 - "The practices of solitude and silence are radical because they challenge us on every level of our existence. ... All the forces of evil band together to prevent our knowing God in this way, because it brings to an end the dominion of those powers in our lives."

- You will often find that when you make a plan to go into solitude, all hell breaks loose. Literally. All sorts of things go wrong: the dishwasher will leak or your car will get a flat tire or you'll get a call from an angry client — it's like there's some hidden axis of evil conspiring together to keep you tethered to the world ...
- What's demonic, what's just coincidence, what's our own inner resistance, we never know for sure.
- But I know this: the resistance is real.
- There's resistance from the world — powerful forces have a vested interest in you staying as distracted as possible. In the so-called "attention economy," some of the brightest minds on the planet are working night and day to keep you glued to your device and away from the freedom of solitude ... because there is money to be made on diversion.
- There's resistance from the flesh — from forces in our own heart that make excuses or bow out last minute or avoid the pain of true solitude ...
- And there's resistance from the devil himself, or at least from demonic powers ...
- C.S. Lewis, in his masterpiece of satire, *The Screwtape Letters*, created a fictional series of letters between a senior demon named Screwtape and his apprentice demon named Wormwood on how to best tempt a young man they call "the patient."
- In it, Screwtape says there are two things the devil cannot stand — music and silence. Because they open the human heart to God.
- Instead, the devil's counter-strategy is noise.
- And then Screwtape has this haunting line, "We will make the whole universe a noise in the end."
- This is the agenda of the evil one — to fill your life with noise, distraction, triviality, diversion.
- My point is, all sorts of mysterious forces — human and non-human — conspire together to do all that is in their power to keep you and me away from solitude, silence, and stillness ...
- If and when you attempt to go into the eremos, you will feel the resistance.

Seam: *But ... if you follow the Spirit into the quiet place ...*

On the other side:

- ... into an encounter with yourself, your enemies, and your God ...
- If you face whatever comes...
- If you draw on God's power to fight evil, within and without ...
- You will discover that on the other side of the struggle is freedom.
- No, solitude is not a "private therapeutic place"; it's a battlefield.
 - It's not always a battlefield. Sometimes you go into solitude and it is a day of rest with God. Beautiful.
 - But this is not the solitude of Jesus in Matthew 4 or John the Baptist or Elijah; they went into the eremos to fight, not to flee.
- But if you pay attention, you'll start to notice that people who spend a lot of time in solitude are some of the most calm, tranquil, joyful people you know. They just radiate this inner peace.
- But it's a peace that was won by struggle ...

Seam: *The key is just to stay with it ...*

Stay:

- There's a saying from Abba Moses, one of the desert fathers. A young monk came to him for advice on prayer, and he said this, "Stay in your cell and it will teach you everything you need to know."
- Stay in your cell; meaning, stay in solitude ...
- Many people abandon solitude long before it does its work of liberation.
- Henri Nouwen said this:
 - "The task is to persevere in my solitude, to stay in my cell until all my seductive visitors get tired of pounding on my door and leave me alone."
- "The task is to persevere." Until the voice of the enemy is defeated by the voice of God.
- Few of us have any idea of the power available to us if all we do is go into the quiet with God ...

- What if the quiet that we so fear holds the secret of our freedom?

Seam: *But, as powerful as it is, there is a death to self that is required to make solitude a regular part of your Rule of Life ...*

Death:

- In Celtic Ireland, early Christian monks called themselves “green martyrs”. Red martyrs were those who literally died rather than deny that Jesus was Lord before the Roman Empire, but green martyrs were those who symbolically died to a normal life to go off into the forest to be alone in prayer.
- They recognized that solitude required a death to the status quo of a culture run by the world, the flesh, and the devil.
- But on the other side of this death to a “normal life” was a kind of resurrection.
- Which is why, down through history, people have often sought wisdom from monks and nuns, and holy hermits, often hiding in caves and on mountains
- As G.K. Chesterton once said:
 - “It is the paradox of history that each generation is converted by the saint who contradicts it most.”
- It is only when we are free of the world’s grip that we can truly change the world ...
- Will you be one of the saints? One of the few who retreat to return, as Jesus did, in power?
- Listen to Luke’s ending to the story:
 - “And Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit”
- We’ll talk more about in our final session, but ...
- I believe this is the call of Jesus upon our generation: To go into solitude, and come back in the power of the Spirit: free to set others free.

Ending:

- Most of us are not called to quit our job and move into the desert.

- But all of us who follow Jesus are called to fashion our own desert in the rhythms and routine of our daily life ...
- To go into solitude... and there find freedom in God.