

Solitude Teaching 01:

The Quiet Place

Intro hook:

- January 27, 1956.
- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is sitting at his kitchen table in the middle of the night, about to walk away from his destiny.
- This was still early in the civil rights movement, and Dr. King was not yet widely known.
- He had been brought in to Montgomery, Alabama, to lead the bus boycott, following Rosa Parks's courageous act of refusing to sit in the colored section of the bus.
- But as the boycott dragged on, the ire of the mob was increasingly turned onto its leader.
- With the rising tide of death threats, Dr. King was fearing not only for his life, but for his wife and daughter.
- The day before, Dr. King had been arrested and jailed for driving 30 miles per hour in a 25-miles-per-hour zone.
- That morning, he was released, but came home to another round of threatening phone calls.
- The evening of the 27th, he could not fall asleep, so he got out of bed, made a pot of coffee, sat down in his kitchen, and began to pray to God in the quiet.
- In a later sermon, he told the story this way:
 - “And I bowed down over that cup of coffee — I never will forget it. ... I prayed a prayer, and I prayed out loud that night. I said, ‘Lord, I’m down here trying to do what’s right. ... But Lord, I must confess that I’m weak now. I’m faltering. I’m losing my courage.’ ... And it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, ‘Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world.’”
- In his biography of Dr. King, the Pulitzer Prize winning historian David Lewis makes the

point that this was a defining moment in Dr. King's life and, as a result, in the nation of America and far beyond.

Seam: *But. Imagine a hypothetical situation ...*

What if?

- What if Dr. King had a smartphone? What if he sat down with his cup of coffee and disappeared into Twitter, or started working on his next TikTok video?
- Or got an emergency text?
- Or started reading the news and fuming over the latest op-ed?
- Or what if he had a TV and just started bingeing a new series?
- Would there have been a Dr. King? Would he have been able to hear God's voice in the quiet and, from it, draw on God's strength to continue the fight? Or would he have been sucked into the black hole of the digital age?
- Hypothetical situation.

Seam: *But it has me thinking about our very real situation as the first generation to apprentice under Jesus in the digital age.*

- What if the greatest threat to the Christian faith today isn't secularism but distraction?
- We live in an era where it's possible to go through your entire life and never be alone; even when we're "alone," we're on our phone or the internet or in our entertainment queue.
- The cultural critic Cal Newport, in his book *Digital Minimalism*, writes, "It's now possible to completely banish solitude from your life."
- The moment that most of us are ever alone, in a room or even in our car, we reach for the appendage of our device — check our texts, open social media, read the news, play music, put on a podcast, Google whatever.
- Our devices keep us tethered to the world of noise.

- And the threat of all this noise and distraction isn't just to our minds or even to our bodies; it's to our souls.
- How many moments have I missed? Where God wanted to speak to me, or shape me, but I was distracted by my devices?

Set up: Is there a practice from the Way of Jesus that could position you and me to hear Jesus' voice in all the noise of the modern world?

- Yes, it is the practice of solitude.
- That night in his kitchen in Montgomery, Dr. King was tapping into a practice that is all over the life of Jesus.

Turn: Turn in your Bibles to Luke 5. Let's read from verse 15...

Luke 5v15-16

The news about [Jesus] 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.

- The phrase "lonely places" is the English translation of the Greek word eremos.
- But eremos can also be translated:
 - The desert
 - The deserted place
 - The desolate place
 - The solitary place
 - Or, my personal favorite, the quiet place
- Jesus' world was very different from my own in Los Angeles, where there are people as far as the eye can see. Most people in his day lived in small, rural villages; most were farmers on small plots of land; all lived within walking distance of the synagogue.
- And outside the populated areas, there were vast tracts of empty, uninhabited land. Called "the eremos."

- Jesus would regularly disappear out into that wide open space, all by himself, to pray.
- Luke tells us “he often withdrew” to the eremos.
- Listen to a few alternate translations of Luke 5.
 - Jesus himself frequently withdrew to the wilderness and prayed. (NET Bible)
 - Jesus often slipped away to be alone so he could pray. (NCV)
 - As often as possible Jesus withdrew to out-of-the-way places for prayer. (The Message)
- When you read the gospels, you find story after story of Jesus, all alone, out in nature; just him, and God.

Seam: *In fact, when you read the Gospels, you notice in Jesus’ life a rhythm of retreat and return...*

Retreat and return:

- Jesus would retreat into solitude; he would get away from people, from noise, from stimulation ... to pray, rest, and listen for his Father’s voice ...
- But he was no hermit. He would then return to be with people in community, and to love and serve ...
- You see Jesus toggle back and forth between solitude and community.
- There are all sorts of ways to group the practices of Jesus, or the spiritual disciplines, but arguably, solitude and community are the two basic containers for all the practices.
- Solitude and community are the twin pillars of the spiritual life, the two legs by which we travel the Way of Jesus.
- The problem is: Many of us in the digital age never really go all the way into solitude or community ...
- Instead, we’re often “alone together”, in the words of Sherry Turkle, the MIT professor and expert on the digital age’s impact on Millennials and Gen Z.
 - You can be with people, but not actually in community. ... Never have relationships go beneath the surface where you know and are known.

- And you can be alone in a room, but on your device.
- We're drawn to solitude, like we're drawn to community, but we're also scared of it.

Seam: *Which is why your mind is likely starting to raise objections:*

Objections:

- Yeah, but I'm an extrovert.
- Or I'm a young parent.
- Or I live a busy life.
- Or What about social justice and mission?
- But again, "Jesus often withdrew into the eremos ..." and, I mean, he was Jesus! You think you're busy? People were literally clinging to him or digging through ceilings or begging from the roadside for his touch ...
- And yet, in spite of the demand (or could it be because of it?), he would regularly slip away ...
- In fact, you can chart Jesus' life on an axis of demand and withdrawal. It seems that, the more in demand Jesus became, the more he would disappear into the quiet.
- We read stories of people literally going out searching for him in the eremos ...
- And in doing so, he laid down for all his apprentices a pattern to follow.

Seam: *Now, this pattern has come to be called the practice of Solitude ...*

Practice:

- To start, let me clarify what Solitude is not.
- First, it's not loneliness:
 - Richard Foster, in Celebration of Discipline, writes:
 - "Loneliness is inner emptiness. Solitude is inner fulfillment."

- Loneliness is a felt absence; but solitude is a felt presence.
- Loneliness is a gnawing ache in the human heart for unrequited love; the gaping wound of the modern soul. Sociologists tell us Gen Z is the loneliest generation of all time.
- But solitude is not loneliness.
- Secondly, it's not isolation:
 - The Hawaiian pastor Wayne Cordeiro writes:
 - "There is a difference between isolation and solitude. They contain similar characteristics, but in reality they are worlds apart. Solitude is a chosen separation for refining your soul. Isolation is what you crave when you neglect the first."
 - Isolation is a movement away from relationship; solitude is a movement toward relationship.
- Finally, it's not aloneness ...
 - When social scientists study the effect of solitude on the human person, they distinguish between solitude and aloneness.
 - Aloneness is what we introverts love: It's when we're not with other people, but we may be texting people or watching TV or reading a book or folding laundry. We're alone, but we're not in solitude.
 - This is a crucial distinction because many people mistakenly assume that solitude is a preference-based spiritual discipline for introverts.
 - This is a tragedy for extroverts because they never experience the depth of intimacy with God that is possible only in the quiet place.
 - And it's a tragedy for introverts too, because solitude is warped into a spiritualized version of a little me-time.
 - In reality, studies show that once you distinguish between solitude and aloneness, introverts have no higher desire for or enjoyment of solitude than extroverts.
- So, what is it?

Solitude defined:

- Very simply: The practice of solitude is intentional time in the quiet with ourselves and God.

- Ruth Haley Barton, the author of our recommended reading for this Practice, writes:
 - “Solitude, at its most basic and profound level, is simply an opportunity to be ourselves with God.”
- That’s why it’s not the same thing as aloneness. You’re not alone; you’re alone with God.
- In the 4th century, St. Jerome said:
 - “[We are] never less alone than when alone.”
- One way to think about solitude is as a place that is free of inputs.
- The only inputs are 1. God and 2. your heart laid open before God.

Seam: *Which is why solitude has two companions: silence and stillness ...*

Silence:

- Silence is pretty self-explanatory, but there are two dimensions to silence:
- Exterior silence, where you silence noise outside you. No people in a crowded coffee shop, no TV in the background, no music in your AirPods, no chimes from push notifications on your phone. It’s quiet.
- But the second dimension is interior silence. Where you attempt — and this is easier said than done — to quiet all the thoughts and worries and emotions and rumblings of the heart inside you.

Seam: *This, in turn, is designed to lead to stillness ...*

Stillness:

- The Eastern Orthodox Bishop Kallistos Ware defined stillness this way:
 - “Stillness is a state of inner tranquility or mental quietude and concentration. Not simply silence, but an attitude, of listening to God and of an openness to God.”
- It’s coming to a place where the troubled waters of your heart settle down like a glassy lake early in the morning. And you’re just there, waiting.

- Often, when I teach on this in our church, I get a glass jar, fill it with water, and put soil from a creek near my house in it. I shake up the jar until the water is all muddy and churned up, and then I set it down and wait. And over a long period of time, all the turmoil starts to settle down, and in the end, all the silt goes to the bottom of the jar and the rest of the water is calm and clear.
- That's a picture of what's happening in you as you go into solitude. We go in all churned up and, over time, if we stay with solitude and silence long enough, we come to stillness.

Hinge: *And most of the great ones of the Way of Jesus down through history would all say that solitude is one of the most important of all the practices of Jesus.*

- Henri Nouwen once said:
 - “Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life. ... We do not take the spiritual life seriously if we do not set aside some time to be with God and listen to him.”
- Think about it: The more intimate a relationship, the more it requires time alone together.
- Imagine if I was never alone with my wife - if we were always with other people, always on the go, always in a loud, noisy environment? We would never be intimate.
- Your relationship to God, and to your own soul, is the same.

What I find when I go into solitude is ...

- I decompress from the overstimulation of the modern world, my body and central nervous system begin to calm...
- I slow down ... from all the hurry and traffic and pathological busyness...
- And I begin to feel.
- I'm forced to confront the good, the bad, and the ugly in my own heart. All my anxieties and ambitions and addictions, it all comes up. All of it is exposed in the safe place of God's loving presence.
- And in solitude, I hear the voice of God over the din of all the other voices, within and without.
- I get God's perspective on my life.

- And often, I come to a place of freedom — success and failure both lose their power over my heart, as does the approval or disapproval of other people.
- In solitude, it's like I come home.

But when I neglect solitude...

- I feel distant from God — I often resort to living off someone else's spirituality, via a podcast or a sermon.
- I feel distant from myself — I lose sight of my sense of identity and calling, who I am and what I'm meant to do.
- I get more and more reactive — I get sucked into the tyranny of the urgent, not the important.
- I lose God's perspective on my life ... on what matters and what doesn't.
- And above all, I get so tired — I run out of energy to do what's truly life-giving. As a result, I shift from engagement to escapism — entertainment, social media, doom scrolling, shopping, sugar, alcohol, etc.
- I become emotionally unhealthy, on edge; the smallest thing can make me yell at my kids, or plunge into despair.
- And I become vulnerable to temptation.
- These are the signs and symptoms of a life without solitude.

And to clarify, the eremos isn't just a place, it's a practice.

- You don't have to go out into the desert of Judea or New Mexico or the Australian outback ... though that may be a fantastic idea.
- But you can practice this in your daily life — walking to a park down the street from your house, or sitting in your backyard at night, or getting up early before your family or roommates are awake... or like Dr. King, and like Jesus, by staying up late.
- We must learn to find the eremos.
- One early Christian father gave this advice:
 - "Find in the busy city the desert of the monks."

- Meaning, find solitude, silence, and stillness right in the middle of your ordinary life.
- Most of us can't go live in the desert; we have to drop our kindergartener off for school by 8 a.m. and be at work by 8:30.
- How do we make space for God? The same way as Jesus; we retreat, we slip away, find a quiet place. And there we pray.

Seam: *We need this practice now more than ever...*

Noise pollution:

- We said a few words about noise pollution earlier.
- Noise pollution can cause hypertension, heart disease, arrhythmia, stroke, learning difficulties, emotional difficulties, cognitive impairment, anxiety, depression, and more.
- One study found that prescriptions for anxiety medication rise 28% for every 10-decibel increase in neighborhood noise.
- In another study in Europe, scientists found that one million years of life are lost each year due to noise, in what they call DALY or "Disability-Adjusted Life Years," people's lives cut short by chronic noise.
- This is of life or death importance!
- We need what Robert Cardinal Sarah of Guinea called "the power of silence."

Seam: *But let's be honest, many of us avoid solitude and silence at all costs!*

Radical:

- Dallas Willard, the Christian philosopher and teacher of spiritual formation, once said this:
 - "Solitude and silence are the most radical of the disciplines for the spiritual life because they most directly attack the sources of human misery and wrongdoing. ... Silence is required to complete solitude, for until we enter quietness, the world still lays hold of us."
- Think about the gravity of his claim: that solitude is the most radical of all the spiritual disciplines.

- All the practices of Jesus are “radical” in our day and age: sabbath, community, generosity, etc.
- But could it be that solitude is the most radical?
- And, as a result, the most neglected?

Seam: *But Jesus went into solitude. All the time. Do we really think we can live without what Jesus considered essential?*

Invitation:

- And Jesus’ invitation was, “Come and follow me.” Another way to translate that is, “Come and follow my way of life.”
- If you’re thinking, is Solitude for me? Yes, it’s for all people, in all places, for all time.
- How you practice has to be customized for your personality and stage of life and living situation, but if Jesus needed this core discipline, how much more so do we?
- But, that said, Jesus does not command you to go into the quiet.
- In fact, very few of the spiritual disciplines are ever commanded.
- Jesus doesn’t command you to read Scripture or live in community or even go to church; he just does all of these things, and then says, “Follow me.”
- You’re not commanded. You’re invited.
- Ruth Haley Barton writes this:
 - “The invitation to solitude and silence is just that. It is an invitation to enter more deeply into the intimacy of relationship with the One who waits just outside the noise and busyness of our lives. It is an invitation to communion and communion with the One who is always present even when our awareness has been dulled by distraction. It is an invitation to the adventure of spiritual transformation in the deepest places of our being, an adventure that will result in greater freedom and authenticity and surrender to God than we have yet experienced.”

Ending:

- I love her imagery of God waiting for us outside the noise and busyness of our lives... waiting

to speak to you, comfort you, breath in courage to your heart, to love you...

- Ultimately, the invitation to solitude is an invitation to intimacy with God
- As St. John of the Ladder said in the sixth century, “The friend of silence comes close to God.”
- Do you want to come close to God? Then follow Jesus into the quiet place.