

Solitude Message

(Part 1)

Solitude may be something that you are not familiar with and you are not quite sure what it is. That's OK. Our goal is to gain a clear understanding of what the Bible says about this important topic and then to provide some practical help in beginning to practice solitude.

George Gallup has said "If the focus of the twentieth century has been on outer space, the focus of the twenty first century may well be on inner space."

I think he is right. All the cultural indicators seem to verify that Gallup is on target. There is tremendous renewed interest in spirituality. In recent months and years, books on angels and the inner life have been national bestsellers.

There is an insatiable hunger in our world for spiritual reality. However, much of this hunger is misguided and misdirected. Even a casual observance of the cultural landscape reveals that there is something hard-wired into man that longs for spiritual connection.

This reality sets up a titan clash of two worlds. On one hand there is the world of the inner man in need of soul connection with God. Words that characterize this world when it is healthy are words like time, reflection, quiet, depth, slow, sustained, On the other hand is the outer or external world of our culture that is visible. Words that characterize this world in the 21st century are fast, instant, convenient, fragmented, noisy, shallow, exhausted.

What we have is a predicament.

THE PREDICAMENT OF SOLITUDE

1. You were created with a need for solitude

Psalm 46:10, which has become the banner verse for this **series** says "*Be still and know that I am God.*"

The first part of Psalm 37:7 says

"Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him;" (NIV)

When you read the pages of Scripture you soon discover that many of the defining moments in the lives of individuals came when they were alone in the presence of God and God spoke clearly to them

Moses—alone in the wilderness when he sees the burning bush
David—out in the pastures taking care of the flocks
Jesus—who regularly withdrew and would go up on the mountain to be with His Father

Thomas Moore has written “The vessel in which soul-making takes place is an inner container scooped out by reflection and wonder.

In other words, imagine your life as a container or bucket. Your life is full with things, pressures, distractions, temptations, and fast-paced living. Thomas Moore says that it is reflection and wonder (solitude) that scoops these out of our soul. It is through solitude that there is now room in your soul for you to meet God and for him to do the work in you that he longs to do.

The problem is that we fill our hearts and souls with lesser gods and we can miss the richness of the relationship with God that we were created to enjoy. Your heart does not have an infinite capacity. Solitude creates capacity for God.

Let’s linger for just a moment on this thought that God desires to be with us. Solitude serves as kind of a homing device that guides us back into the presence of our Father. What a wonderful privilege that God has made us to know him.

C.S. Lewis said “When you come to knowing God, the initiative lies on his side. If he does not show Himself, nothing you can do will enable you to find Him.” How astonishing that the infinite Creator of the universe should seek out undeserving people for heart-to-heart relationship”

In John 15 Jesus uses a vineyard to teach a critical spiritual truth. He uses the image of the vine and the branches to communicate our need to stay connected spiritually

John 15:5 *“I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit . . .”*

Within six verses in John 15, Jesus says abide ten times. It is an imperative. You can sense the poignancy and passion of His plea. Jesus knows that He is about to leave His friends, yet He is saying, We must be together.

He knows that in the coming years, these downcast, frightened men now standing with Him in the vineyard will be called to produce an unheard-of, miraculous amount of fruit—enough fruit to turn the world upside down. And Jesus knows that they cannot begin to achieve that kind of eternal impact without the one thing they’re most likely to forget: more of Him.

John 15:6 If anyone does not abide he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned.”

These words sound harsh and devastating. But, Jesus isn't threatening a branch with hell, he is simply declaring a reality. He makes the dramatic point that when we are not abiding in Him, we will wither. We will lose our spiritual usefulness because there is no sustaining and replenishing life flowing into the branch.

Pascal has dramatically stated “The sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room.”

So, God created you to need times alone and quiet in order to know God more deeply. But there is a second reality that creates this predicament

2. Everything about our lifestyles and culture mitigates against solitude

We live in an age of continuous activity which consumes all our time and attention but which cannot satisfy the longings of our souls. The irony is that the more we try to manage our lives by technology and time-saving devices, the more we abandon our souls and relegate our inner life to barrenness.

By the way a lot of us live, you would think that we believe the bumper sticker theology that says “Jesus is coming soon. Look busy.”

John Ortberg shares about a story that was carried in a newspaper in Tacoma Washington about a basset hound named Tattoo—didn't intend to go for an evening run but when owner shut his leash in the car door and took off for a drive, Tattoo had no choice. Motorcycle policeman passed car and noticed something being dragged behind the car. Tattoo was rescued but not before reaching 20-30 mph and rolling over several times. He has not asked to go for an evening walk in a long time.

Hurry is a devious enemy of the soul. In our rush to accomplish much and live life to the fullest, we rob ourselves of some of life's richest moments. Following Jesus cannot be done at a sprint.

Many believers have forfeited God in the busyness of life's activities. The badge of busyness is one that we wear with honor, but in reality it is a curse to the health of our souls.

Henri Nouwen observes “There was a time when silence was normal and a lot of racket disturbed us. But today, noise is the normal fare, and silence, strange as it may seem, has become the real disturbance.”

I think about this as it related to worship planning. We don't want dead time. Too much silence is awkward.

If it is true that our minds are assaulted by some 8,000 messages a day, then it is no wonder that we are uncomfortable with silence. If it is true that one daily edition of the New York Times has more information and facts than Jonathan Edwards saw in his entire 17th century life, it is no wonder that we have a hard time with sustained concentration.

Think about how much slower life was in the days of Jesus. When the Bible says in Mark 10:46 that they came to Jericho, that was an all day trip spent walking along the dusty road. The lack of technology and transportation forced life to be slower. Built into the fabric of culture was a pace of life that was more conducive to solitude.

But, oh how the times have changed. Busyness is part of what defines our culture in the 21st century.

Before long busyness is no longer about the length of our to do list or the number of meetings on our palm pilot. It has morphed into a state of mind and disposition of the soul. I have a hurried spirit. So, even when I begin to meet with the Lord, I have difficulty staying engaged in that moment. My hurried spirit constantly reminds me of all that I should be and need to be doing.

It is hard to be silent, silent with my mouth, but even more, silent with my heart."

There is a voice deep within us that intuitively know something is wrong. In quiet moments alone we long to get off the treadmill but we don't know how.

There is hope however, We don't have to be pushed into the world's mold.

Paul said in Romans 12:2 (NIV)

"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will."

We can break free but it begins by renewing our hearts and minds and that happens by spending time in the presence of the Lord.

Listen once again to Paul from the 4th chapter of Philippians. He says -

"Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things."

There is not much in our world that encourages us to think about that which is noble, right, pure or lovely. Times of solitude create the opportunity to dwell on the things of God. But it will take time to develop this habit.

Just as the body takes time to recover from an infection that has afflicted it, so the soul needs times of silence and solitude for its recovery from the insane pace of modern life.

Cultivating solitude can be painful and hard when you are addicted to noise, excitement and activity. I think the starting place for us is to acknowledge the predicament we are in. The richness of our relationship with God is cultivated through solitude but the magnetic pull of our culture toward busyness is a powerful force. It will take more than a little courage for us to pull ourselves free and choose to pursue God.