

Blaise Pascal was a Frenchman living in the 1600's. Before he died at the age of 39, Pascal made huge contributions to physics and mathematics. He was a child prodigy, and some of his best work as a scientist was done in his teenage years. But as a young adult, he had an encounter with God, and his interest moved in the direction of philosophy and theology.

Not long before he died, he wrote a book called, *Pensées*. The book is mostly a mathematician's case for believing in God, but he also shares some lucid thoughts on what it means to be human. It is a textbook of psychology before psychology was even a valid discipline. One of his most interesting statements sums up the core of his argument. He said, "All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone."

According to Pascal, we fear the silence of existence, and instead choose aimless distraction, running from our problems into false comforts. The root issue is we never learn the art of solitude.

If you consider today's world, Pascal was a prophet. If there's one word to describe the direction of the last 100 years, it's connectedness. From the telephone, to the radio, to the TV, to the internet, or to the smartphone, we've found ways to be connected—all the time. Lynn and I can stand in our kitchen in San Carlos and not just talk to our grandkids in Kentucky, but also see them on a screen! Certainly, there are many benefits to all the opportunities to stay connected. But the one thing we often sacrifice is solitude.

A writer named Zat Rana puts it this way, "We now live in a world where we're connected to everything except ourselves... In today's world, people can go their whole lives without truly digging beyond the surface-level masks they wear; in fact, many do. We are increasingly out of touch with who we are, and that's a problem."

Solitude, Silence, and Slowing

I'd take it one step further and say this constant connectivity means we're not only out of touch with ourselves but also with God. Not only do we need to learn to sit quietly in a room alone, but we also need to learn to sit quietly in a room alone with God. The word for this is solitude. I believe we all need solitude and deep down we all long for it. Maybe one of the reasons it's hard for us is we associate it with loneliness. But solitude isn't just being alone; it's letting our aloneness and even our loneliness lead us into solitude. Henri Nouwen wrote this:

Loneliness is painful; solitude is peaceful. Loneliness makes us cling to others in desperation; solitude allows us to respect others in their uniqueness and create community... The longing for solitude is the longing for God. To know him, to connect with him, to encounter him.

It may be helpful to think of solitude as a space.

- Solitude is a space in time set apart for God and God alone, a time when we unplug and withdraw from people, from tasks, from distractions.
- Solitude can also be a physical space where we meet with God, a space not cluttered with work, noise, technology, and even people.
- Finally, solitude is a space in ourselves where God's Spirit and our spirit dwell together; that place within me reserved for the intimacies only he and I share.

Solitude and silence often go hand in hand. Silence can deepen our experience of solitude because it creates a space for listening to God and to what's really going on in our own soul. It's almost like in solitude and silence our true soul is able to come out of hiding and encounter the One who knows and loves us like none other. Parker Palmer writes,

"Our soul is like a wild animal... If we want to see a wild animal, the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods, shouting for the creature to come out. But if we are willing to walk quietly into the woods and sit patiently for an hour or two at the base of a tree, the creature we are waiting for may well emerge..."

Silence and solitude are nurtured by just one more thing, and that's what I'd call slowing. Someone once asked Dallas Willard, "What's the most important thing I should do to remain spiritually healthy?" After a long pause, Willard said, "You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life." The guy was a little surprised, but he wrote it down, looked up, and said, "That's a good one. Now, what else is there?" After another long pause, Willard said, "There's nothing else."

Hmmm. Ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life. Hurried people rarely rub shoulders with solitude; there are too many things to do, too many people to see, and too many places to go.

I realize for many people what I'm talking about here seems unrealistic. Maybe you're a young mother with three kids. You're thinking, "Yeah! I'd love some solitude but how's that possible?"

They're up at the crack of dawn and by the time they're bathed and in bed I'm too exhausted to even think!" Or maybe you're an extrovert, and you love being with people; the idea of spending thirty minutes alone and in silence sounds like purgatory. In light of that, it's important to say this may look different for different people. It may look different as you move from one season of life to another. But, somehow, all of us need solitude to nourish our soul.

Jesus Demonstrates Solitude, Silence, and Slowing

There are many and varied examples of this in the Bible. The best example is Jesus. No one had as many demands on his life as him, and no one had as much urgent work to do in so little time as him. Yet he still made time for solitude, and somehow he never seemed rushed or stressed out.

A Busy and Demanding Day in Capernaum

If you have a Bible, turn to the Gospel of Mark, chapter one. The setting here is the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Of all the Gospel writers, Mark portrays Jesus as constantly on the move. Whereas other Gospel writers emphasize Jesus' teaching, Mark emphasizes his action. Mark's favorite word is the word "immediately." He's constantly saying, "And immediately Jesus did this or that." The word immediately is used several times in verses 21–34. These verses describe a very full and demanding day for Jesus in Capernaum. He began in the synagogue where he taught them and then cast out a demon. Then he went to Simon Peter's house, perhaps hoping to get some rest, and immediately he was confronted with another crisis. Peter's mother-in-law was sick with a fever. After Jesus learned of this, he went in and healed her.

But that wasn't the end of it. Look at verses 32–34.

That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was. (Mark 1:32–34)

So the whole town gathers at Peter's door, and Jesus spends the evening healing and casting out demons. That's what you call a busy day—a grind. There were days like that for Jesus; hectic, full, demanding days. We have days like that, too. This is real life. And the things we have to do aren't always as spiritually significant as what we see Jesus doing here. Diapers need to be changed, cars need to be serviced, bills need to be paid, business trips need to be taken, and kids need to be taken to soccer practice. That's real life, particularly in this fast-paced place where we live. Jesus gets it. He had lots on his plate—just like us.

But the thing about Jesus is he never seemed harried, frantic or compulsive in his need to get things done. There always seems to be this sense of intentionality and calm about him. Why is that? What was his secret?

Jesus Regularly Withdrew From the Crowds

The answer lies in what we see Jesus doing next.

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!"

Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." (Mark 1:35–38)

When it says, "*very early in the morning,*" Mark uses a phrase referring to last watch of the night between 4:00 and 6:00 am. He says Jesus went out to a "*solitary place.*" That word "*solitary*" can mean a place in the wilderness, or an uninhabited place. And when it says, "*he prayed,*" a verb tense is used to emphasize continuous action—he prayed continually.

This is something Jesus made a habit of doing. Later, in Mark 6, when his disciples returned from a busy day of ministry, adrenaline pumping, it says, "*The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they'd done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going they didn't even have a chance to eat, he said to them, 'Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest'*" (Mark 6:30–31). What is that, but an invitation to slow down?

This comes out in the other Gospels as well. After reporting John the Baptist was murdered by King Herod, Matthew says, "*When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place*" (Matthew 14:13).

And then if you go over to Luke's Gospel, you see this repeatedly. In Luke 5 it says: "*...news about him (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*" (Luke 5:15–16). It appears this was our Lord's habit—retreating from the crowds to be alone with his Father.

You see the same thing in Luke 6. Right before Jesus chose the Twelve it says, "*One of those days Jesus went out to a mountain-side to pray, and spent the night praying to God*" (Luke 6:12). Literally, it says he went to "the mountain," as if this was a specific place he often went.

And then later in Luke 9, he goes to the same mountain, "*About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray*" (Luke 9:28). Sometimes this is called "the mount of transfiguration" because it was there, Jesus was transfigured and spoke with Moses and Elijah.

Many believe this so-called "mountain" was the Mount of Olives where Jesus went to pray on the night of his betrayal, where he poured his heart out to His Father and was so distraught he sweat drops of blood. It's no wonder, on that night, Judas brought the

authorities there to arrest Jesus, knowing that was where he so often went, and it would be likely to find him there (Luke 22:39, 47).

Jesus Practiced Solitude When the Demands Were Greatest

It's quite clear from these glimpses into Jesus's life; he practiced solitude. He took intentional times of slowing. And it's very interesting that he often did it when the demands upon him were greatest.

You see that here in Mark 1. I find this funny. Simon Peter wakes up and notices Jesus is gone. He rouses the other eleven and is in a panic, "Where's Jesus? Have you seen him? I can't believe he's not here. We've got work to do. We've got people lined up already. They've traveled far and wide to see Jesus. We can't let them down! Where is he? This is just like him!" So they go on a manhunt (literally they "hunted" for him; a word always used in a hostile sense) for Jesus, and when they find him they rebuke him, *"Everyone is looking for you!"* In other words, "What in the world are you doing out here? We've got work to do!"

It's interesting, the last time Jesus was out in the desert he was tempted by Satan; this time he's tempted by Simon. Yet, Jesus said, "No, let's go somewhere else so I can I can preach. That's why I came. That's why my Father sent me." Simon Peter is controlled by the needs and demands around him. It's like Kierkegaard said: "The press of busyness is like a charm...seeking to lay hold of ever-younger victims so that [we] are scarcely allowed time for God to develop in us Christian character." But Jesus doesn't let the press of busyness charm him; rather he's controlled by the will of God, which he discovered in prayerful solitude.

Solitude has a way of clarifying our purpose. Solitude is a place where we step away from the tyranny of the urgent and see what God is really calling us to be and to do. Sometimes the things we're stepping away from are very good and noble things. It's hard to say no to those things. But solitude is a place we gain freedom from the pressures and expectations of other people and of our frenzied culture, which might otherwise try to mold us.

We all know about the frog in the kettle. Put the frog in a pot in boiling water, and it will immediately hop out. But, put the frog in water at room temperature and turn the heat on slowly, it will stay there until it cooks to death.

It's the same with us. The greatest dangers aren't the sudden, dramatic ones. They're the ones that sneak up on us and are so much a part of our environment; we don't even notice them. Our culture is dominated by a worldview, which is toxic. We're surrounded by values about money, success, beauty, security, and love, which are lethal; and unless we learn to withdraw, we very well might never realize we're getting cooked. This is why Paul urged us, *"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind"* (Romans 12:2). Solitude is about renewing our minds.

Jesus Practiced Solitude Without Legalism or Rigidity

Another thing, which strikes me about the way of Jesus in this regard, is he practiced solitude without legalism or rigidity. Nowhere in the Gospels do you see Jesus telling his disciples to wake up every morning at 5:30 am to pray and read their Bible for 30 minutes. Instead, Jesus' times of solitude came at a variety of times, in a variety of situations. Often, they were occasioned by a particular need or decision. He didn't meet with God out of a sense of legal obligation but rather out of a personal need to be in God's presence without distraction. His time alone wasn't to appease God, or as some kind of rabbit's foot with which to go into the day.

As a young believer, I was extremely eager to not only know God but to please God. I learned early on from other Christians, spending time alone with God was a requirement. I learned it had to be done in the morning because how could you start off your day without God? And the earlier you woke up, the better because it showed how committed you were and also gave you more time, and of course the more time you spend with God, the more spiritual you are. I learned there were all kinds of thing I was supposed to do in this time. I was to read the Bible and pray, not just for my own needs but for the everyone else's, including all the missionaries overseas. I was to keep a journal and write eloquently about all the things God was teaching me, and if I were really spiritual, this would be accompanied by fasting. And somehow in the midst of this I became convinced if I didn't do these things first thing in the morning, my whole day would be doomed!

I finally realized all of this was just putting me in bondage. Instead of drawing me closer to God, I felt more distant because I could never quite live up to the higher and higher standard. So, for a while, I kind of just gave up trying.

Somewhere along the line, I learned I still needed to spend time with him, and I longed for that, not to appease him or demonstrate my amazing spirituality, but just because I needed him and loved him.

One of the things I learned was even my desire to be with him was a response to his gracious invitation to me to come to him. I recall, as a boy growing up in the Catholic church, going to the confessional booth. The first thing we were taught to say was, "Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned, and it's been six months since my last confession." You see the focus was immediately on me and my negligence in showing up to confession. So, now when I do come to him, I don't come filled with guilt and shame, but I come with gratitude that he's drawing me near; he's initiating fellowship and intimacy with me. And the point isn't to race through a series of activities, but simply to be with him, to pour my heart out to him, and to listen to him as the Spirit opens my heart to his word. I've learned there's simplicity in solitude.

It's fundamentally a place of prayer, and of responding to his invitation to be present with Him.

Eugene Peterson tells a story about when he was five years old. He walked across a meadow between his backyard and a fenced field, and watched a farmer named Leonard Storm, a huge Norwegian, plow the field with his tractor. Eugene always wished to get a ride on that John Deere tractor.

One summer he was standing at the fence watching Leonard Storm plow the field. He was about 100 yards away when he spotted him. Mr. Storm stopped the tractor, stood up from the seat and made strong waving motions to Eugene with his arm. He'd never seen anyone use gestures like that. He looked mean and angry; he was large and ominous in his overalls and straw hat. He was yelling, but the wind was blowing against him, and Eugene couldn't hear what he was saying. He knew he was probably where he shouldn't be. Five-year-old boys often are. So Eugene turned and left. He didn't think he'd done anything wrong. He just wanted to get to ride that tractor. But he went home feeling rejected, rebuked.

Peterson tells what happened not long after that:

The Sunday after my disappointment at the edge of his field, Brother Storm called me over after church and said, "Little Pete...why didn't you come out in the field Thursday and ride the tractor with me?" I told him I didn't know I could have, that I thought he was chasing me away. He said, "I called you to come. I waved for you to come. Why did you leave?" I said I didn't know that was what he was doing. He said, "What do you do when you want to get somebody to come to you?" I showed him, extending my index finger and curling it back toward me three or four times. He harrumphed, "That's piddling, Little Pete. On the farm, we do things big."

I see that story as kind of a parable. We long to be with God, but sometimes we see him rebuking us, when in fact he's inviting us to come to him in a big way; to talk to him, to ride with him; to get to know him better.

Isn't that what the Gospel is about? When Jesus died on the cross, the veil into the Holy of Holies was torn, and we're now invited and welcomed into his presence. As the writer of Hebrews said, "**let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith**" (Hebrews 10:22).

So let me encourage you to ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life, and create space for solitude and silence.

- Create that space by setting time apart for God and God alone, a time when you unplug and withdraw from people, from tasks, and from distractions.
- Create space by finding a physical place where you meet with God. A place like the mountain Jesus often retreated to; a space not cluttered with work, noise, technology, or even people.
- Finally, create space within your own self; the space where God's Spirit and your spirit dwell together in union. The place within you reserved for the intimacies only he, and you share.

Solitude will require perseverance, especially if you're not practiced in it. Like any habit, it takes time to develop, but once you do, it becomes much easier.

You might want to consider two ways to practice solitude. The first would be to create this space at regular intervals throughout your day. The Psalmist says, "**Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice**" (Psalm 55:17). What if you took just a few minutes at each of these intervals—evening, morning and noon to stop what you're doing and create space for God?

Another way to practice solitude is to set aside longer periods to be alone. Maybe once a month you create this space for a half-day, and once a year you find a full day or even a weekend to be alone.

Let me close with this from Francis de Sales.

There's no clock, no matter how good it may be, that doesn't need resetting and rewinding twice a day, once in the morning and once in the evening. In addition, at least once a year it must be taken apart to remove the dirt clogging it, straighten out bent parts, and repair those worn out. In like manner, every morning and evening a man who really takes care of his heart must rewind it for God's service... Moreover, he must often reflect on his condition in order to reform and improve it. Finally, at least once a year he must take it apart and examine every piece in detail, that is every affection and passion, in order to repair whatever defects there may be.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2018 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA
Catalog No. 1438-9FC