

April 6, 2008

I Thessalonians 5:17-18 / Ephesians 6:10-18 / Luke 5:12-16
The Balancing Act – Making Time for Ministry, Taking Time to Pray

One of our goals in today's service was to help you experience for just the smallest segments of time, something that I've found most Americans are very uncomfortable with — being silent, still and quiet; communing with God without moving or speaking while other people are seated all around you!

Yet silence and stillness before God (and not just for a few seconds) are things that the Bible advocates on numerous occasions:

In Psalm 37:7, David tells the people of Israel: ***“Be still before the Lord...”*** Nearly one hundred Psalms later, speaking of something he has had to work at or force himself to do in relation to his restless, questioning mind, that causes him to be somewhat stirred up inside, He says: ***“I have stilled and quieted my soul within me...”***

That is, David had learned the blessedness and spiritual benefits of being able to still the restlessness in his soul and quiet all those voices in the mind that constantly say, “Do this and don't forget you must do that.” “You're falling behind.” “You're wasting precious time...” He had learned to quiet those relentless voices and simply be in God's presence. Better yet simply enjoy being in God's presence.

Likewise, the Sons of Korah wrote in Psalm 46 (Luther's favorite Psalm): ***“Be still and know that I am God.”***

Habakkuk wrote: ***“Let all the earth be silent before Him.”***

Zephaniah wrote: ***“Be silent before the Sovereign Lord...”***

And Zechariah wrote: ***“Be still before the Lord, all mankind...”***

Each was written in a different context, addressing a different set of circumstances, but the message is the same in each case — there is spiritual benefit to be gained by slowing down, and ceasing from all our frantic busyness — forcing ourselves to wind down and be completely still, and motionless, and silent before God — quieting our souls before Him and without saying a word or listening to another human voice, simply contemplate Him and commune with Him in silence.

To a people scurrying around here and there and doing everything they can to secure their prosperity and safety, God said this in Isaiah 30:15:

“This is what the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel says: In repentance and rest is your salvation; in quietness and trust is your strength...” And then He adds, *“But you would have none of it.”*

And it's not just them that needed to hear those words. We do too. God says the same thing to every one of us: *“In repentance and rest is your salvation; in quietness and trust is your strength...”* The question is, will He also say of us: *“But you would have none of it.”*

You see, If I were an anthropologist from another country (and I'm serious when I say this) and I came to America to evaluate a huge cross-section of the population, I would be forced to draw the inevitable conclusion (from the vast majority of my research and observations) that Americans in general somehow believe that they can do more, and accomplish more, by being anxious and by worrying about things than if they were simply to bring their burdens to God in prayer, leave them at His feet before the throne of grace, and simply trust Him to work things out for the best.

Of course, no Christian would ever admit that! We know better! But if we were impartial objective analysts, hired to gauge what people really believed by the pace of their life, and the emotional state of their soul, and the degree of stress and anxiety they constantly wrestled with / If we were to consider the state of their spirit with regard to worry, or were able to read their thoughts when we told them they should set aside one whole day to be quiet and silent and still before God, communing with no one but Him in prayer for that entire day, we'd probably be very surprised by what we discovered!

Because we'd probably find them thinking thoughts like this: I don't have time. I don't know if I could be still or silent that long. I'd get bored. I have too much on my plate. You don't understand — my mind is racing in a million different directions! What about all my responsibilities? I can't afford stop. What would I do? Where would I go? How could a person spend a whole day communing with God? Wouldn't that be a waste of time?

Few of us have learned the secret that Luther voiced when he said: *“I have so much to do today that I must spend the first three hours in prayer.”*

You see, you can't read Luke 4-5 without noticing a very distinct pattern in the life of Jesus — a rhythm we could say, whereby He sought to balance time spent with people doing ministry with time spent alone in quiet secluded prayer (4:38-42/5:12-16). Time spent working with time spent in solitude. / Time being busy with time being still. / Time spent doing with time spent doing little or nothing.

And when I say that I'm not suggesting that prayer is "nothing." Prayer is a vital Christian activity. But you know I found it interesting that in chapter 4 verse 42, after Jesus ministers all the previous day and then all evening long as well to the crowds of sick people and demon possessed, it tells us that the next morning, *"At daybreak Jesus went out to a solitary place."*

And notice that on that particular occasion Luke DOESN'T say: *"At daybreak He went out to a solitary place TO PRAY."* Not at all! It simply says, *"At daybreak He went out to a solitary place."* And I'm not saying He didn't pray, or pray at least some of the time, but in reality we have no idea what He did there! He may have prayed, but He may not have prayed.

He may simply have gone there to enjoy the solitude of being alone with no one else around. He may have simply enjoyed taking an early morning stroll while the "dew was still on the roses," and being refreshed in spirit as He watched the rays of the morning sun gradually disperse the shadows, and break with all their radiance over the Judean hillside.

He may have simply stood there looking out over the majestic beauty of the creation — a morning mist still hovering over a little ravine, or an eagle soaring overhead, and bringing to mind the words of Isaiah, that *"Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles..."*

Or maybe He was doing nothing (God forbid) —nothing but soaking in the quiet or drinking in the refreshment and restfulness of spirit produced by being alone and away from the crowds for just a short while, while He communed with His Father in the quiet of the day.

Not jogging. Not speed walking to work up a sweat. Not an exercise routine — just slowly meandering and occasionally stopping to contemplate, focus and offer up grateful thoughts or silent praises to His Father in heaven.

In fact, to me, it makes more sense to say that on that particular occasion He was (by their perception) doing "nothing." For when they go looking for him, and find Him, they immediately begin (from what we can tell) trying to convince Him to stay. No mention of finding Him deep in prayer, or interrupting Him while He's praying, just finding Him there — period.

Plus, if they had seen Him kneeling in earnest prayer, or like Hannah (centuries before) standing erect, eyes closed, lips silently moving, and hands lifted in a prayerful stance, they surely would have kept their distance, and Luke would have made some reference to it.

But he doesn't. Of course, we could take Luke 5:16 and push it backward to cover this instance too, where we are specifically told Jesus often withdrew to lonely places to pray. Or we could let the text stand by itself and hear it telling us He simply "went out to a solitary place... period!"

In fact, may I suggest that it's only our workaholic culture, which tells us we always have to be doing something, or catching up on something, or engaged in some type of activity, that makes us feel Jesus had to be engaged in earnest prayer, rather than just being still and silent and alone!

You see, we forget that in the Old and New Testaments were written prior to the industrial revolution, and the hectic pace of suburbia, when simply "*looking unto the hills,*" or "*laying down in green pastures, beside still waters*" doing nothing but quieting the soul, and saying nothing as they contemplated the greatness of God in absolute silence, was believed to have redemptive value for the soul!

If we don't think so, we are thinking more like Americans than Hebrews! More like business men and women raised with time clocks and schedules and quotas that need to be met and incentives for production and penalties for shortfalls, than like shepherds rising in the still of the morning, and watching the sun come up over hills dotted with grazing sheep, as the sun illuminated the sky, and the flocks began their bleating to welcome the new day. (Here we rise to cars starting, and highways clogged with people speeding off to work!)

We have so much we could learn from them. Or from Jesus, who sometimes, it seems, went out to the solitary places simply went out to be alone, and gain the benefits of solitude. After all, in chapter 4, when He was staying at Simon's house, He could have simply asked Simon to give Him a room to pray in and make sure no one walked in while He was praying. But He doesn't. He purposely slips away to the lonely places to pray, maybe because the walk to get there was itself was part of what refreshed Him!

The walk out to the lonely places outside of town would take quite a while — possibly even the fringes of the wilderness where He had spent 40 days being tempted of the Devil—a beautiful but rugged, treeless, rock-strewn, no-man's land where there was little or no vegetation and thus no people.

A place Jesus could go and have uninterrupted time to commune with His Heavenly Father, get refocused and recharge His spiritual batteries (part of His being fully human as well as fully divine).

That's the **FIRST** thing I need to stress today — Our need to be wise and balance ministry time with alone time; our need to make time for ministry to others, but our equal need to take time to get away alone and pray.

That's what Jesus example shows us: As Christians we must make ministry to others a priority, just like He did. That's part and parcel of what it means to be "Christlike." All around us there are people with physical, emotional and spiritual needs, and Jesus (merely by His example) shows us how important it is to reach out to them and help them and sacrifice time that could be spent doing other things for ourselves in the service of ministering to the needs of others.

Yet never to the exclusion of time specifically laid aside, on a regular basis to be alone with God and pray (Christ we must remember, "*withdrew OFTEN to the solitary places to pray*"). It wasn't just catch a moment when I can. It appears to have been regular, planned, non-negotiable, "I refuse to fill this time in with any other activity" type of resolve to do so.

WHY? Because God is the source of our strength — an inexhaustible Source! He's like rivers of water, or a spring of refreshment that never runs dry. He's like a source of power that we can feed off every day of our lives and never drain to even the slightest degree! Which is why spending time alone with Him energizes us.

In fact, that's what He wants us to come to Him for—for His strength and joy and power that fill the lack in my soul. We are not sufficient; He is our sufficiency. Everything we need we get from Him.

You see, so often we come to God thinking we must bring something to Him in prayer—a good moral report card, or some gift or accomplishment, or achievement, or list of sacrificial deeds. A productivity sheet that lists all the efforts we made since the last time we talked. And if we don't feel we have anything to offer, we hesitate to come.

We so easily forget the words of Paul in Acts 17 who said that "*The God who made the world, and everything in it, does not live in temples made by hands, as if He needed anything, for He Himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.*" He's the inexhaustible source of everything! Whatever you give Him is something that comes from Him! That's Paul's whole point: *God has no needs! God is totally self-sufficient and totally self-complete. He lacks nothing and needs nothing and depends on nothing outside of Himself for anything!*

Tozer put it well when he said: "*To admit the existence of a need in God is to admit incompleteness in the divine Being. Need is a creature word and cannot be spoken of the Creator. God has a voluntary relation to everything He has made (that is, He relates*

to it because He chooses to and not because He needs to) He has no necessary relation to anything outside Himself. His interest in His creatures (including us) arises from His sovereign good pleasure, not from any need those creatures can supply nor from any completeness they can bring to Him who is complete in Himself...The problem of why God created the universe still troubles thinking men, but if we cannot know why, we can at least know this; He did not bring His worlds into being to meet some unfulfilled need in Himself.. The word necessary is wholly foreign to God."

And what does all that mean for us? It means that when we go to God we go to receive from Him what we need, and NEVER to give to Him something He needs! He doesn't have any needs!

The call of Christ is not for us to serve or minister to Him (per se). As the One who has no needs He doesn't need us to minister to Him! Rather, His call is for us to minister to others in His name, and go to Him to get our needs met! Go to Him for our strength! It's with this thought in mind that Paul says: *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."*

Only when you realize that will you go to Him at all times, realizing your lack of having any-thing to bring is not a reason to stay away, but the whole reason you are to go in the first place! He simply wants us to come and be ministered to by Him! That's why we go to Him! To receive from Him all that we lack in ourselves, and to do so whenever and wherever we sense that lack!

Which brings us right into our **SECOND** point. We must get away to spend times in solitude with God for two reasons — not only because we're just plain needy people who have found in Him an inexhaustible Source of grace and strength to help meet all our needs, but because the spiritual ministry He calls us to do for others in His name, cannot be carried out for long apart from the refreshing and reviving influences of the Holy Spirit.

This was a lesson I learned the hard way in my first two years as a Christian in the Dominican Republic. Being a person who had run from God for 12 years, and wasted most of those 12 years in sin and debauchery of every kind, I felt compelled (upon becoming a Christian) to make up for those 12 years in the two years I was there (stupid and impossible, I know, but true nonetheless)!

And it didn't help that I was a dyed in the wool New Englander, who detested the "welfare mentality" where people ask for help, or ask for handouts when with a little extra effort they could get by or do it themselves. And that, I thought, applied to me as well in my relationship with God. So it wasn't long before I struggled to stay afloat.

Physical labor, I had no problem with. But when it came to ministering to those kids — many of whom were from dysfunctional homes with severe discipline problems and equally severe emotional, spiritual and psychological needs, I found myself so drained on occasion that I could barely go on!

I discovered very quickly: You cannot do Christian ministry (for long) in your own strength. You can't live the Christian life, or do the things Christ calls you to do apart from the continual supply of grace and strength that come from spending time alone with Him and relying fully upon the power of the Holy Spirit for everything you need.

Horatius Bonar (writing in the mid-1800's) put it well when he said this in regard to prayer:

"We have time for everything but prayer... Why is there so much running to and fro, yet so little prayer? Why so many meetings with our fellow men, yet so few meetings with God? Why so little being alone, so little thirsting of the soul for the calm, sweet hours of unbroken solitude, when God and His child hold fellowship together as if they could never part? It is want of these solitary hours that not only injures our own growth in grace, but makes us such unprofitable members of the church of Christ. In order to grow in grace we must be much alone... In one single quiet hour of prayer (our soul) will often make more progress than in days of company with others. It is in the desert that the dew falls the freshest and the air is purest. So with the soul. It is when none but God is near — when His presence alone, like the desert air in which there is mingled no noxious breath of man, surrounds and pervades the soul — it is then that the eye gets the clearest, simplest view of eternal certainties. It is then that the soul gathers in wondrous refreshment and power and energy. And it is also in this way that we become truly useful to others. It is when coming out fresh from communion with God that we go forth to do His work successfully. It is in the closet that we get our vessels so filled with blessing, that, when we come forth, we cannot contain it to ourselves but must, by a blessed necessity, pour it out whithersoever we go."

You see, this isn't merely a "slow down your work schedule sermon." It's not a "living at a slower pace will make you happy sermon." This is not simply a message about de-stressing or cutting back the hours you put in at work so you can have more time to do what many Americans do whenever they have extra time — waste it sitting in front of a dumb TV set!

This sermon is a call to set aside time to minister to the needs all around you, and yet to do so with the full assurance that you'll never be able to if you don't likewise set aside times for prayer and

solitude silent communion with God where you *“withdraw often,”* and get away from the crowds, and go to solitary or lonely places to be still and pray to the One (who as we’ve seen), earnestly yearns to meet every need of every one of His ministering servants.

Then **LAST** I’d like to finish with a section from an article I read this past week. It’s by a man named Mark Buchanan. He writes this: *“I’ve been in a hurry most of my life. Always rushing to get from where I am to where I’m going. Always cocking my arm to check my watch—doing that habitually, mechanically, mindlessly. Always leaning heavily on the gas in the passing lane, angry that the driver in front of me doesn’t share my sense of urgency. Always fuming over having to wait in bank lines and grocery checkouts and road construction zones....But all that hurry has gotten me no farther ahead. It’s actually set me back. It’s diminished me. My efforts to gain time have only lost it. Whole epochs of my existence have swept by me in a blur, with not even a cheap souvenir to remember them by...My biggest regret....my biggest blunder...was...being in a hurry. Getting to the next thing without fully entering the thing in front of me. The Chinese join two characters form a single pictograph for the word busyness: heart and killing. That is stunningly incisive. Busyness kills the heart....Too much work, the British used to say, makes Jack a dull boy. But it’s worse than that. It numbs Jack. It parches Jack. It hardens Jack. It kills his heart. When we get too busy, everything becomes either a trudge or a scramble, the doldrums or sheer mayhem... We lose concern for people, beauty and goodness... cease to laugh when our children laugh (yelling at them to quiet down instead)... we don’t weep when others weep... and when we hear news of trouble among our neighbors we simply hope it won’t involve us... busyness kills the heart. And not only that, busyness robs us of knowing God the way we might... some facets of God we glimpse through motion, but other facets of God we only discover through stillness. ‘Be still,’ the psalm instructs, ‘and know that I am God.’”*

So we come full circle and discover why Jesus refused to allow Himself to become so busy that He neglected time for prayerful solitude in lonely and quiet places—because to do so would have been sin.

To let busyness (even if it’s the busyness of doing ministry) numb our emotions, or parch the soul, or harden the heart, would be sin. When we get so busy that we lose concern for people, or fail to notice the beauty of God’s creation all around us, or yell at our children for laughing, or find it impossible to weep when others weep, or hope that our neighbor’s troubles don’t involve us, that busyness is killing our heart, and we need to repent.

Not merely slow down, but get back in touch with the One who's presence and Spirit turns hearts of stone into hearts of flesh, makes hard hearts soft, and callous hearts tender. Then we won't have to be cajoled into doing ministry, we'll want to! The love of Christ which will fill our hearts as a result, will make us want to!

And we won't have to dread waking up at daybreak to go to a solitary place to be alone with God and pray — we'll want to! Because we'll realize that quiet times spent walking to those lonely places and praying or communing with God along the way, actually energize and rejuvenate our spirit's far more than that extra half hour or hour of sleep.