

Solitude: Slipping Away to Spend Time Alone with God!

Twenty years ago Thursday, I learned how to slip away to spend time alone – even while in a crowd of thousands of other people. It was 20 years ago that I first saw Bonnie my beloved. I was surrounded by thousands of students, yet for a month I actually never remember seeing anyone but her. In fact my memory is blank when it comes to my 4 roommates, my dozens of classmates, my 3 fellow workers, my score of teachers, and even my handful of really close friends – I never remember even seeing them for those 30 days in May twenty years ago this month. All I remember is being alone in complete captivation with talking and listening to Bonnie. Whether we were in the Amphitorium with its 7500 seat, or the Mall, or the Zoo ... everywhere and anywhere that Bonnie was, I was completely focused upon her! Silly you might say, crazy you might think – but actually it was the reality that ***you and I can choose to find solitude anywhere we are if our attraction to the one we want to be alone with is strong enough!***

Please turn to Mark 1.21. Life was full on that Saturday in Capernaum. Mark 1:21-34 was just ONE DAY! Jesus had gone from morning to night giving of Himself to all who came to Him. And how they had come, on donkeys, in carts, carried by family, surrounded by crowds, multitudes had flocked to the Messiah, the Healer, and the Friend of Sinners.

The truth of this statement appears in the last 3 verses (v. 32-34), as Mark is rehearsing Peter's account of the works done by Jesus at the close of a busy day:

“And at even, when the sun did set, they brought unto Him all that were diseased, and them that were possessed with devils; and all the city was gathered together at the door. And He healed many that were sick of divers diseases, and cast out many devils.”

Capernaum was witness to more of Christ's miracles than any other spot on earth. He preached more sermons in and around Capernaum than at any other place during His entire ministry. But it is also here just outside Capernaum that we discover the life long secret habit that gave Jesus the power and strength to live such a life filled with giving.

Jesus had cultivated the discipline of solitude. He had perfected the art of getting alone with God. He had learned the secret of waiting on God. And as our perfect example, He calls each of us this morning to do the same. We must learn to seek and find a solitary place in our life to regularly get alone with God.

Was this regular in Christ's life? Yes, from start to finish. Notice with me:

Matthew 14:23 And when He had sent the multitudes away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. Now when evening came, ***He was alone there.***

Mark 6:46 And when He had sent them away, ***He departed to the mountain*** to pray.

Luke 4:42 Now when it was day, He departed and ***went into a deserted place.*** And the crowd sought Him and came to Him, and tried to keep Him from leaving them;

Luke 6:12 Now it came to pass in those days that ***He went out to the mountain*** to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God.

Luke 22:39-46 Coming out, He went ***to the Mount of Olives***, as He was accustomed, and His disciples also followed Him.⁴⁰ When He came to the place, He said to them, "Pray that you may not enter into temptation."⁴¹ And ***He was withdrawn from them*** about a stone's throw, and He knelt down and prayed, ⁴² saying, "Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done."⁴³ Then an angel appeared to Him from heaven, strengthening Him.⁴⁴ And being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.⁴⁵ When He rose up from prayer, and had come to His disciples, He found them sleeping from sorrow.⁴⁶ Then He said to them, "Why do you sleep? Rise and pray, lest you enter into temptation."

John 6:15 Therefore when Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, ***He departed again to the mountain by Himself alone.***

Back to Mark 1:35. Notice that this Passion of Jesus is seen in His PRE-DAWN solitude, time alone with God. Why? Because the story¹ of Saturday's river of miracles continues with a wonderful Sunday morning, as verse 35 reveals:

“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.”

Jesus had gotten as much sleep as he desired, and he awoke. It was dark, and everyone was asleep in the house. He noiselessly stole out of the room and found his way to the street. Soon he was out of town and climbing a hillside to some remote spot, possibly a hidden hollow, where he lifted up his soul in ecstasy to the Father.

E. Stanley Jones once described time in God's Word in solitude and prayer as a “time exposure to God.” He used the analogy of his life being like a photographic plate which, when exposed to God, progressively bore the image of God in keeping with the length of exposure.

Jesus exposed his humanity to God as our Perfect Example. As God the Son, Jesus needed no more of the fullness of God (Colossians 2:8, 9). Jesus is the exact representation of God's nature (Hebrews 1:3). But the reason for Jesus' prayers was to show he did not live his life as God the Son apart from God the Father, but rather as a man in dependence upon God. He said, “[T]he Son can do nothing by himself” (John 5:19) and “The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work” (John 14:10).

Jesus came, lived, and died constantly doing the will of God His Father, as we should seek to live our lives in step and under the control of God's Spirit.

Jesus lived this way, seeking to be alone with God, because he wants us to live our lives this way. Jesus shows us that intimate communion; alone with God was needed to live a godly life full of power. No less is needed for us! What an overpowering argument.

Solitude, time alone with God in His Word, is the great necessity of our spiritual lives. We need to be alone with God daily! We need to find times to get away alone. We need to get up early if necessary. Few of us are called to spend many hours in daily prayer, but *all* of us must spend *some* time. If it is impossible when the family is awake, pray before they get up. If you have no place you can do this at home, find a place to park your car on the way

¹ These ideas drawn from Hughes, Mark 1:35-39.

to work and pray in the anonymity of the passing traffic of a busy world around us.

When I was in seminary and had four roommates sharing a tiny apartment, I could not think or pray in there, so daily I would get into my car and drive down to the local shopping center and park my car among the other cars. I would slouch down behind the wheel and pray. Or I would go to a local park, sit on a bench, and pray. Nothing bothered me there. Or I would park my car along the way. We need to do this. It does not have to be hours and hours, but we need to spend time alone with God! We must have that divine time exposure to God without interruption. Jesus did it, and we need to do it. Begin small, but do it.

Notice next that though Jesus was out there all alone in his deserted place communing with God, he was not safe. Like our world each day, Jesus was interrupted:

“Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: ‘Everyone is looking for you!’” (vv. 36, 37).

The disciples had stumbled out of Capernaum, combed the hills, spotted Jesus on a hill, perhaps the magnificent panoramic cliff of Arbel, and when they found him they mildly scolded him. The idea was, “Hey Jesus, things are really rolling for this new ministry you called us to after last night. We need to get right back and capitalize on it!”

But that was not the will of the Father. And only Jesus had bothered to get in tune with that will. Only Jesus had made the time to get alone with God.

“Jesus replied, ‘Let’s go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.’ So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons” (vv. 38, 39).

This morning, how can we start cultivating² time alone with God? Jesus demonstrated it is our priority. Where do we start? I believe there are three keys to turn any time or place we may find ourselves, into a place of ***Solitude: Slipping Away to Spend Time Alone with God!***

1. First, Solitude **starts** when we are READING IN GOD'S WORD.
2. Next, Solitude **continues** when we are MEMORIZING FROM GOD'S WORD.

² These ideas were drawn from Mark 1.21-35 in Hughes, R. Kent, *Preaching the Word: Mark—Jesus, Servant and Savior*, (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books) 1997

3. Finally, Solitude **amplifies** when we are MEDITATING UPON GOD THROUGH HIS WORD.

So first off, ***Solitude: Slipping Away to Spend Time Alone with God*** starts most readily when we are *reading* God's Word! The Word is God's voice and we must stop to listen. It is amazing that any Christian would ever imagine that they can live a Christian life without regularly reading the Bible, Our human minds are plagued by leaks. They need to be refreshed again and again. Some who have been believers for years have never read the Bible through once. There are truths God has for us that we have not inconvenienced ourselves enough to discover. No wonder we are as empty as a flat tire. What a difference reading the Word can make in our lives.

Dr. Harry Ironside (1876-1951) was one of the greatest pastors and Bible teachers of the 20th Century. He wrote over 80 volumes, preached across the world, and for 18 years the pastor of the great Moody Memorial Church of Chicago. Yet he never went past the 8th grade in school. Though he had little formal education he was a man of great spiritual power. How was he so powerful and influential for God? He confessed it was because he started a great habit at a young age. He has read the Bible fourteen times by the age of fourteen. His mark is still on Chicago and indeed the entire world because he learned early to listen to the voice of God. Three to five pages a day is a good place to begin. Within a year you will have read the entire Bible. We begin to get alone with God only when we take God's Word seriously as more important than our daily meals.

Second, ***Solitude: Slipping Away to Spend Time Alone with God*** **continues** when we are MEMORIZING FROM GOD'S WORD.

Mrs. Donald Gray Barnhouse once³ said this of her famous preacher husband:

Someone once asked him how long it had taken him to prepare a certain sermon. His answer was "Thirty years and thirty minutes!" He had immersed himself in the Bible from the time he was fifteen years old, when he memorized the Book of Philippians a verse a day until he knew the entire book by heart, then went on to other passages. He felt it was not enough to learn by rote — it had to be by heart; because you loved and believed it.

Memorizing God's Word is recording the voice of God into the memory of our very own minds. Downloading audio files from God! Think of it, you can

³ Quoted from Hughes, R. Kent, *Preaching the Word: Ephesians—The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books) 1997.

actually carry God's voice singing softly through your mind any time you want to hear it – by memorizing God's Word! Lifting it off the pages of the Bible, writing it down upon the pages of our heart. It is so easy to start if you decide to do so today. Why not begin with a verse — perhaps a verse a week — fifty-two in one year!

Few have lived as stressful and frenetic a life as Jonathan Goforth (1859-1936) a Canadian missionary to China. In his lifetime as a missionary to China, he resolved to try to memorize a verse each day. By the time he lost his eyesight at age 70 he had the entire New Testament written in his heart. Yet he never stopped in his daily labor to travel by foot across China, preaching all day long in towns and villages. He lived a simple, hard working life yet always spent enough time to read each verse aloud 7 times as he progressed through God's Word. All that to aid in memorization of the Word.

Finally, ***Solitude: Slipping Away to Spend Time Alone with God*** **amplifies** when we are MEDITATING UPON GOD THROUGH HIS WORD. This is the secret of all of God's great warriors. Hudson Taylor, the founder of China Inland Mission, conquered immense hardships by daily meditation on God's Word. Dr. and Mrs. Howard Taylor record this in his biography:

It was not easy for Mr. Taylor, in his changeful life, to make time for prayer and Bible study, but he knew that it was vital. Well do the writers remember traveling with him month after month in northern China, by cart and wheelbarrow with the poorest of inns at night. Often with only one large room for coolies and travelers alike, they would screen off a corner for their father and another for themselves, with curtains of some sort; and then, after sleep at last had brought a measure of quiet, they would hear a match struck and see the flicker of candlelight which told that Mr. Taylor, however weary, was poring over the little Bible in two volumes always at hand. From two to four a.m. was the time he usually gave to prayer; the time he could be most sure of being undisturbed to wait upon God.

Meditating upon the Word brings us immediately into the intimate presence of God, but too few are willing to pay the price.

“Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither” (Psalm 1: 1–3).

C. T. Studd (1860-1931) was another of God's great servants. His life was like his grass hut, there were no doors to shut, he lived with - and for, his beloved pygmy tribes. How did he prepare to teach as many as 5,000 at a time? How did he get ready to disciple the scores of church leaders who came to sit at the foot of his cot every morning? How did this man prepare to awake to a sea of black faces and white teeth waiting on the ground outside his hut, for him to open the Book of God to them? Simply in his own words, may I read from his diary⁴ dated February 7th, 1886?

"The Lord is so good to give me a large dose of spiritual champagne every morning which brace one up for the day and night. Of late I have had such glorious times. I generally awake about 3:30 AM and feel quite wide awake, so I have a good read, and then have an hour's sleep before I finally get up.

Studd's converts once described these times as –

"A Bible is taken down from the shelf, and Bwana is alone with God. What passed between them in those silent hours was known a few hours later to all who had ears to hear."

Studd continues in his diary,

" I find then that what I read is then stamped indelibly upon my heart all through the day; and that it is the very quietest of times, not a foot astir, nor a sound to be heard, saving that of God. If I miss this time I feel like Samson shorn of his hair and so of all his strength. I see more and more how much I have to learn of the Lord. I want to be a workman approved of the Lord, not just with a pass degree as it were. Oh how I wish I had devoted my early life, my whole life to God and His Word. How much I have lost by those early years of self pleasing and running after this world's honors and pleasures. "

Jesus had a life was so full of people and ministry he didn't even have a moment to stop and eat. Yet in the midst of all that, what was He?

Peaceful, calm, focused, and confidently following God's will.

How did He do that? What was the secret? The secret is the times Jesus spent ALONE WITH GOD. SOLITUDE, time alone with God, time in secret away from everything and everyone else.

⁴ C. T. Studd, Cricketeer and Pioneer, p. 57, 206.

Jesus had to be alone with God, and Jesus wanted to be alone with God. And Jesus found **times** no matter what was going on and **places** no matter where He was, to be alone with God.

This morning, how can we start cultivating⁵ time alone with God? Jesus demonstrated it is our priority. Where do we start? I believe there are three keys to turn any time or place we may find ourselves, into a place of ***Solitude: Slipping Away to Spend Time Alone with God!***

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⁵ These ideas were drawn from Mark 1.21-35 in Hughes, R. Kent, *Preaching the Word: Mark—Jesus, Servant and Savior*, (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books) 1997

APPENDIX

Spiritual⁶ disciplines: Writers have distilled the Christian life into disciplines. Some say there are 12 (Foster), others have found 15 (Dallas Willard). One simple list by Bill Hull lists just four:

Conversing with God through His Word by prayer and solitude;
Denying self through fasting and frugality;
Serving Christ's church through submission and sacrifice; and
Obeying Jesus by equipping and evangelizing.

Charles⁷ Swindoll also finds four disciplines that lead us to enjoying Intimacy With The Almighty. He has called these:

Simplicity: a reordering of our lives around God and His plan;

Silence: stillness of the soul that waits on God

Solitude: an essential for Intimacy with God;

Surrender: because intimacy requires letting go of our selves and yielding to God. "Refuse to be a slave to anything but God" (coffee, alcohol, TV, etc.)

JESUS SHOWS US WE SHOULDN'T LET THE MECHANICS HOLD US BACK.

Jesus doesn't teach us about one special posture when we get alone with God – because any posture will do. In the Bible, people got alone with God in all different positions:

- ✓ Abraham's trusted servant found he was alone with God while standing at a well (Gen. 24:12-14).
- ✓ Moses responded to being alone in God's presence by bowing down (Ex. 34:8).
- ✓ Paul said that one way to enjoy getting alone with God was by lifting holy hands (1 Tim. 2:8).
- ✓ Jesus was on His face once when He was alone with God (Matt. 26:39).
- ✓ The Nation of Israel in a time of repentance and returning to the Lord were alone with God as they were sitting and seeking Him (Jud. 20:26).
- ✓ Elijah was alone with God and so intense that he knelt and put his head between knees (1 Kings 18:42).
- ✓ A leper came alone before God as he was kneeling (Mk. 1:40).
- ✓ Daniel some times was facing the direction of Jerusalem's Temple, when he got alone with God (Dan. 6:10).
- ✓ Jesus got alone with God His Father with uplifted eyes as He walked down the Kidron Valley toward Gethsemane (John 17:1).

⁶ Bill Hull. Building High Commitment In A Low-Commitment World. Fleming H. Revell, Grand Rapids, MI. p. 96.

⁷ Intimacy With The Almighty, Anaheim, CA, Insight For Living, 1996, p. 33.

DON'T LET YOUR LOCATION HOLD YOU BACK.

Jesus never taught that there was only one place to get alone with God – because we are able to, and invited to, get alone with God everywhere. In the Bible, people found a quiet place in God's presence in all different places:

- ✓ David confessed that he needed at times to get alone with God while he lay in bed (Ps. 4:3-4, 8; 63:6).
- ✓ Solomon learned how to get alone with God in the Temple, which was God's house (1 Kings 8:27-30).
- ✓ King Abijah was marching in battle when he found time to get alone with God (2 Chron. 13:14-15).
- ✓ Elijah was alone with God in a cave (1 Kgs. 19:9-10).
- ✓ Jesus taught we could get alone with God in a closet (Matt. 6:6), or in the street (Matt. 6:5).
- ✓ Jonah had an incredible time alone with God in a fish (Jonah 2:1-10)
- ✓ Peter had an unforgettable time alone with God on a house top (Acts 10:9)
- ✓ Paul instructed the early church that they could get alone with God everywhere they found themselves (1 Tim. 2:8).
- ✓ Paul found a place he could be alone with God while staying in someone's home (Acts 9:39-40), another time by a river (Acts 16:13), often in prison (Acts 16:23-26), and even by the sea (Acts 21:5-6).
- ✓ Jesus looked for and found spots to be alone with God in a garden (Matt. 26:36-44), on a mountain (Lk. 6:12), in a remote spot away from the city of Capernaum (Mk. 1:35), in the wilderness (Lk. 5:16), and finally on a cross (Lk. 23:33, 34, 46).

GETTING ALONE WITH GOD CAN BE AT ANY TIME.

Don't let your schedule hold you back. Jesus doesn't teach us about the times of prayer – because we are to pray at all times. In the Bible, people got alone with God at all different times:

- ✓ The priests were instructed to get alone with God every evening and morning (1 Chron. 23:30)
- ✓ Anna the saintly and aged woman who greeted Jesus when He was presented to God as a baby was characterized by getting alone with God day and night (Lk. 2:37; 18:7)
- ✓ Daniel one of the towering giants among Old Testament saints was in the habit of getting alone with God three times a day (Dan. 6:10)

- ✓ The Psalmist says we should get alone with our Great God today (Ps. 95:6, 8)

- ✓ Elijah the mighty prophet got alone with God while the evil priests to Baal danced and gashed them elves, at the time of the evening sacrifice (1 Kgs. 18:36)
- ✓ Jeremiah confesses he had learned to get alone with God in his youth (Jer. 3:4)
- ✓ Moses said a good time to remember to get alone with God is after enjoying the bounties of a good meal (Deut. 8:10)
- ✓ Hezekiah the great King learned to get alone with God when he faced his greatest adversaries, and when trouble was literally at the gate, he quietly spread his hands to God (2 Kgs. 19:3-4)
- ✓ Peter and John cultivated a pattern of retreating from all their ministry demands in Jerusalem and quieting their souls by getting alone with God in the Temple daily at the ninth hour (Acts 3:1)

- ✓ David found he was most often getting alone with God when his troubles were hitting him daily (Ps. 86:3)
- ✓ David also said that he ended each day by getting alone with God at bedtime (Ps. 4:4)
- ✓ Jesus remember gets alone with God in early morning (Mk. 1:35)
- ✓ Paul gets alone with God at midnight (Acts 16:25).
- ✓ Jesus taught in His ministry to the disciples that there is a never a time that we can't get alone with God (Lk. 18:1) which caused Paul to say that our times alone with God should be ceaseless (1 Thess. 5:17).

DON'T LET YOUR TROUBLES HOLD YOU BACK FROM GETTING ALONE WITH GOD.

Jesus doesn't teach us about the circumstances of solitude – because any circumstance will do as a place to get alone with God. In the Bible, people are seen getting alone with God in all kinds of circumstances:

- ✓ When Jesus was so burdened that He was loudly crying He got alone with God in Gethsemane (Heb. 5:7).
- ✓ When Job was so incapacitated that he had to resort to sitting in ashes, and shaving his head for painful sores, he learned even there he could get alone with God (Job 1:20-21; 2:8).
- ✓ While Jesus was sweating blood, and in deepest agony, He was able to get alone with God (Lk. 22:44).
- ✓ While the Publican was smiting breast, he was able to get alone with God (Lk. 18:13).
- ✓ David had a broken heart, clothed him self in sackcloth, and was crying, but that didn't stop him from getting alone with God, and pouring out his heart (Ps. 6:6; 34:18; 35:13; 62:8)

- ✓ While Joshua was so grieved that he was applying dust to his head, he was able even then to get alone with God (Josh. 7:6).

SO WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR? FOLLOW CHRIST'S PERFECT EXAMPLE!

The posture, place, time or circumstance is not the issue of prayer. Prayer is to be a total way of life – an open communication with God, which goes on all the time. And if prayer is a way of life, then we need to understand how to pray. This is precisely why Jesus teaches us this model prayer.

He puts it succinctly in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 “Pray without ceasing. (KJV)”

A modern spiritual Goliath was George Mueller. His life may be distilled down to these words he wrote in a diary:

It has pleased the Lord to teach me a truth, the benefit of which I have not lost for more than 14 years. The point is this: I saw more clearly than ever that the first great and primary business to which I ought to attend every day was, to have my soul happy in the Lord. The first thing to be concerned about was not how much I might serve the Lord, or how I might glorify the Lord; but how I might get my soul into a happy state, and how my inner man might be nourished... Before this time my practice had been, at least for ten years previously, as a habitual thing, to give myself to prayer in the morning. Now I saw that the most important thing I had to do was to give myself to the reading of the Word of God, and to the meditation on it, that thus my heart might be comforted, encouraged, warned, reprov'd and instructed; and that thus, by means of the Word of God, while meditating on it, my heart might be brought into experimental communion with the Lord.⁸

⁸ Scroggie, Method in Prayer, pp.17-18.

Enoch Walking
David Singing
Elijah Restoring Soul
Paul Praising in Prison
John Worshiping on Patmos

Solitude of:

TIME John 17; Mat 26.36; Luke 6.12; Mark 1.35;
PLACE: Mat 14.13, 23; Mk6.46; L5.16;6.12;Jn18.2
SPIRIT: L9.18

Rx 9 *Fast from the Media* Throughout this book, the notion of modern fasting occurs often. Media is perhaps one of the most important kinds of fasts. Have a *no-television* week or month. Don't listen to the news perhaps for a week. Pray in the car instead of listening to the radio. Or simply enjoy the silence for a change. Cancel the newspaper or magazine. Create an intentional solitude.

Charles Swindoll, *Intimacy with the Almighty*. Dallas, Texas: Word Publishing, Inc., 1996, 80 [NEW 55].

Pg 18 Richard Foster's words penetrate:

Superficiality is the curse of our age. The doctrine
Of instant satisfaction is a primary spiritual problem.
The desperate need today is not for a greater
number

Of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep
People. Richard J. Foster, *Celebrating of Discipline*
(San Francisco: Harper & row, 1978)I.

I. Reordering Charles Swindoll, *Intimacy with the
Almighty*. Dallas, Texas: Word Publishing, Inc.,
1996, p. 28. **One's Private World: The Discipline
of Simplicity.**

Pg. 28

The DecisionThe Discipline

to reorder one's private world simplicity
to be still silence
to cultivate serenity solitude
to trust the Lord completely surrender

**I. Reordering One's Private World: The
Discipline of Simplicity.**

Pg 36 2. Being Still: The Discipline of Silence.

Pg 37- "Be still and know that I am God" (Ps. 46: 10 NIV). Before hurrying past that profound command, let's turn it over in our minds Charles Swindoll, *Intimacy with the Almighty*. Dallas, Texas: Word Publishing, Inc., 1996, p. 37-38. several times.

Case striving and know that I am God.

Stand silent! Know that I am God! [TLB]

Let be and be still, and know recognize and understand that I am God. [AMP]

"Give in", he cries, "admit that I am God." [Moffat]

"Stop fighting, " he says, "and know that I am God."

[TEV]

I am especially intrigued by the creative paraphrase employed by Eugene Peterson:

Step out of the traffic! Take a long, loving look at me, your High God, above politics, above everything.

[The Message]

Pg. 38 However we may prefer to read it, this is an emphatic imperative addressed to God's own people. People of every race, color, culture, and era...people of any level of maturity and age...people who are employed or unemployed, single or married, with or without children, all people whose God is the Lord. We are commanded to stop (literally)...rest, relax, let go, and make time for Him. The scene is one of stillness and quietness, listening and waiting before Him. Such foreign experiences in these busy times! Nevertheless, knowing God deeply and intimately requires such discipline. Silence is indispensable if we hope to add depth to our spiritual life.

Have you ever been alone with God?

When He was alone, the twelve . . . asked of Him . . . Mark 4:10.

His Solitude with us. When God gets us alone by affliction, heartbreak, or temptation, by disappointment, sickness, or by thwarted affection, by a broken friendship, or by a new friendship—when He gets us absolutely alone, and we are dumbfounded and cannot ask one question, then He begins to expound. Watch Jesus Christ's training of the twelve. It was the disciples, not the crowd outside, who were perplexed. They constantly asked Him questions, and He constantly expounded things to them; but they only understood after they had received the Holy Spirit (see John 14:26). If you are going on with God, the only thing that is clear to you, and the only thing God intends to be clear, is the way He deals with your own soul. Your brother's sorrows and perplexities are an absolute confusion to you. We imagine we understand where the other person is, until God gives us a dose

of the plague of our own hearts. There are whole tracts of stubbornness and ignorance to be revealed by the Holy Spirit in each one of us, and it can only be done when Jesus gets us alone. Are we alone with Him now, or are we taken up with little fussy notions, fussy comradeships in God's service, fussy ideas about our bodies? Jesus can expound nothing until we get through all the noisy questions of the head and are alone with Him.⁹

Has this troubled you yet? I am aware¹⁰ of the wise warnings against using words like "all," "every," and "always" in what I say. Absolutizing one's pronouncements is dangerous. But I'm going to do it anyway. Here it is: It is impossible for any Christian who spends the bulk of his evenings, month after month, week upon week, day in and day out watching the major TV networks or contemporary videos to have a Christian mind. This is always true of all Christians in every situation! A Biblical mental program cannot coexist with worldly programming.

- Phil 2:1 Let this mind.
- Col. 3:16 Let the word of Christ richly dwell
- Rom. 12:1-2 Present yourself and renew your mind

So God's goal is that we cultivate the mind of Christ. And, the scandal is that Christian's neglect this area immensely. But, the cure is available this morning: PLAN how to saturate your mind with the word.

How? Remember Paul's list of Colossians 3:1-17 Thirteen Put-offs and a Dozen Put-ons! Translated this morning I would say:

1. Stop watching TV, movies, video games and videos for some planned periods of time.
2. Start replacing these "Godward mind deadeners" with times of systematically and prayerfully reading and studying God's word
3. You have the time -- take it!

Let's choose the mind God has willed us to have today. **HOW DO WE RECOVER OUR GODWARD MIND? WHAT ARE SOME WAYS TO RETURN TO OUR REST IN JESUS?** The Navigators, a worldwide discipleship and Bible Memorization ministry has published¹¹ the following list of practical guidelines.

⁹Chambers, Oswald, *My Utmost for His Highest*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers) 1989.

¹⁰ Quoted and adapted from Hughes, *Disciplines of a Godly Man*.

¹¹ Swenson, *Overload*, p. 137-160.

1. **GUARD AGAINST MEDIA CONSTITUTING YOUR ONLY BARRIER TO LONELINESS:** It is easy to laps into a media-saturated existence, which eventually leads to a media-dependent existence. When lonely, bored, or stressed, the first thing we often do is activate our media surrounds, which usually means turning on the television. In a previous era, we would instead have perhaps visited a friend.
2. **ESTABLISH MEDIA LIMITS** - If media in all its forms continues to escalate in visibility and dominance, there obviously comes a point when we have to impose limits. Decide such limits as an act of intention rather than randomness. For example, consider putting some limits on television. It is acceptable for TV to be an interlude, but it should not become a way of life. Have standard rules that make sense. Don't force yourselves into re-deciding every week. Possible suggestions (not laws!) might include: Allow up to seven hours of TV (including videos) each week. Require all viewing to be preplanned or intentional. No TV is allowed until homework or chores are done. One hour per day can be viewed only for approved shows. Also, limit the number of channels be leery about expanding. More is not necessarily better. Limit the number of TVs as well. Although the majority of children today have a television in their own room (fifty-eight percent), mostly it is not a good idea. For one reason, we want to live as family otherwise "home is where we live alone together." For another reason, it is essential that parents keep an eye on what their children watch. Beyond television, consider also establishing limits on Nintendo, Sega, Walkman, and Internet use.
3. **HAVE NON-ELECTRONIC CHILDREN'S PARTIES.** Consider not renting or viewing any electronics for birthdays or slumber parties. Cultivate other activities instead. For our boy's birthdays, we would always have two special events: marshmallow fights (they are safe and don't hurt) and darts thrown at balloons.
4. **RESIST ADVERTISEMENTS:** Ads are omnipresent in our "engineered-messages" lives. If we try to completely avoid them, we will not succeed. The next best thing is to discipline ourselves and train our children to be wary.
5. **ZAP THE SET:** Consider always having the remote nearby when watching television. Use it freely. Also use it as a threat and a teaching tool. If something objectionable comes on, hit the mute button, switch the channel, or turn off the set.
6. **DISCONNECT CABLE SELECTIVELY:** If you have cable and most people do there are some things best to avoid. Most cable operators will allow selective disconnection from those elements that you find objectionable. When media expert Bob DeMoss was asked if there was any reason people should have HBO and MTV in their homes, his answer was immediate: "None."
7. **FAST FROM THE MEDIA** Throughout God's Word fasting occurs often. Media is perhaps one of the most important kinds of fasts. Have a no-television week or month. Don't listen to the news perhaps for a week. Pray in the car instead of listening to the radio. Or simply enjoy the silence for a change. Cancel the newspaper or magazine and donate the funds rather to the fasting and hunger relief ministry. Create an intentional solitude.

1. REGAIN CONTROL OF THE VALUE SYSTEM "Parents can no longer control the atmosphere of the home and have even lost the will to do so," asserted Professor of Social Thought¹² Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind*. Sadly, many of us have essentially and tragically lost control of the value system of our children often compliments of the media. If we still hope to influence them in the direction of virtue, it is important to make our move early.
 9. HATE EVIL - Evil, for reasons not completely clear to me, is always more interesting. This obviously is not a statement about the way things should be, but simply a statement of the way things are. Once we understand this, much that is mysteriously wrong in life becomes clearer. For example, if we had forty-nine stations broadcasting healthy, virtuous programming, and only one station broadcasting violent or sexual programming, most of America would be tuned into the one channel. Even church people. Evil is always more interesting. Understanding the allure of evil explains why we watch so much of it, even when it is so clearly destructive. The sheer volume of evil our nation is exposed to on a daily basis is one of the most disturbing effects of the proliferation of media. The only remedy I know is two thousand years old: "Hate what is evil; cling to what is good." Romans 12:9
 10. SUBSTITUTE SOOTHING MUSIC: Music fills the air and the ears of America, especially our youth. For many youth (perhaps most), music heroes have even greater stature than movie or sports stars. To simply tell these kids to stop listening is not realistic they won't. But if we can give them an alternative, perhaps.... At least we can try. And hope. And pray. Looking beyond the interests of our children to our preferences there is a wide choice of what we might listen to. My advice: Listen to that which calms the spirit.
 11. ENCOURAGE READING Someone once said, "Having your book made into a movie is like having your oxen made into bouillon cubes."
 12. CREATE A READING EVENING Consider having a regular or episodic family reading evening.
 13. VISIT USED BOOKSTORES.
- HAVE A FAMILY OUTING: The library is as enjoyable a place to visit as the movies, but only if you start young enough.

TYRANNY OF THE URGENT!
A booklet by Charles E. Hummel

"Have you ever wished for a thirty-hour day? Surely this extra time would relieve the tremendous pressure under which we live. Our lives leave a trail of unfinished tasks. Unanswered letters, unvisited friends, unwritten articles, and unread books haunt quiet moments when we stop to evaluate. We desperately need relief.

¹² Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher education has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1987), pp 58-59.

But would a thirty-hour day really solve the problem? Wouldn't we soon be just as frustrated as we are now with our twenty-four allotment? A mother's work is never finished, and neither is that of any student, teacher, minister, or anyone else we know. Nor will the passage of time help us catch up. Children grow in number and age to require more of our time. Greater experience in profession and church brings more exacting assignments. So we find ourselves working more and enjoying it less.

jumbled priorities...?

When we stop to evaluate, we realize that our dilemma goes deeper than shortage of time; it is basically the problem of priorities. Hard work does not hurt us. We all know what it is to go full speed for long hours, totally involved in an important task. The resulting weariness is matched by a sense of achievement and joy. Not hard work, but doubt and misgiving produce anxiety as we review a month or year and become oppressed by the pile of unfinished tasks. We sense uneasily that we may have failed to do the important. The winds of other people's demands have driven us onto a reef of frustration. We confess, quite apart from our sins, 'We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done.'

Several years ago an experienced cottonmill manager said to me, 'Your greatest danger is letting the urgent things crowd out the important.' He didn't realize how hard his maxim hit. It often returns to haunt and rebuke me by raising the critical problem of priorities.

We live in constant tension between the urgent and the important. The problem is that the important task rarely must be done today, or even this week. Extra hours of prayer and Bible study, a visit with that non-Christian friend, careful study of an important book: these projects can wait. But the urgent tasks call for instant action - endless demands pressure every hour and day.

A man's home is no longer his castle; it is no longer a place away from urgent tasks because the telephone breaches the walls with imperious demands. The momentary appeal of these tasks seems irresistible and important, and they devour our energy. But in the light of time's perspective their deceptive prominence fades; with a sense of loss we recall the important tasks pushed aside. We realize we've become slaves to the tyranny of the urgent.

can you escape...?

Is there any escape from this pattern of living? The answer lies in the life of our Lord. On the night before He died, Jesus made an astonishing

claim. In the great prayer of John 17 He said, "I have finished the work which Thou gavest me to do" (v.4).

How could Jesus use the word "finished"? His three-year ministry seemed all too short. A prostitute at Simon's banquet had found forgiveness and a new life, but many others still walked the street without forgiveness and a new life. For every ten withered muscles that had flexed into health, a hundred remained impotent. Yet on that last night, with many useful tasks undone and urgent human needs unmet, the Lord had peace; He knew He had finished God's work.

The Gospel records show that Jesus worked hard. After describing a busy day Mark writes, "That evening, at sundown, they brought to Him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered about the door. And He healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons" (1:32-34).

On another occasion the demand of the ill and maimed caused Him to miss supper and to work so late that His disciples thought He was beside Himself (Mark 3:21). One day after a strenuous teaching session, Jesus and His disciples went out in a boat. Even a storm didn't awaken Him (Mark 4:37-38). What a picture of exhaustion.

Yet His life was never feverish; He had time for people. He could spend hours talking to one person, such as the Samaritan woman at the well. His life showed a wonderful balance, a sense of timing. When His brothers wanted Him to go to Judea, He replied, "My time has not yet come" (John 7:6). Jesus did not ruin His gifts by haste. In *The Discipline and Culture of the Spiritual Life*, A. E. Whiteham observes: "Here in this Man is adequate purpose...inward rest, that gives an air of leisure to His crowded life: above all there is in this Man a secret and a power of dealing with the waste-products of life, the waste of pain, disappointment, enmity, death - turning to divine uses the abuses of man, transforming arid places of pain to fruitfulness, triumphing at last in death, and making a short life of thirty years or so, abruptly cut off, to be a 'finished' life. We cannot admire the poise and beauty of this human life, and then ignore the things that made it."

wait for instructions...

What was the secret of Jesus' work? We find a clue following Mark's account of Jesus' busy day. Mark observes that "...in the morning, a great while before day, He rose and went out to a lonely place, and there He prayed" (Mark 1:35). Here is the secret of Jesus' life and work for God: *He*

prayerfully waited for His Father's instructions and for the strength to follow them. Jesus had no divinely-drawn blueprint; He discerned the Father's will day by day in a life of prayer. By this means He warded off the urgent and accomplished the important.

Lazarus' death illustrates this principle. What could have been more important than the urgent message from Mary and Martha, "Lord, he whom you love is ill" (John 11:3)? John records the Lord's response in these paradoxical words: "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that he was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was" (vv.5-6). What was the urgent need? Obviously to prevent the death of this beloved brother. But the important thing from God's point of view was to raise Lazarus from the dead. So Lazarus was allowed to die. Later Jesus revived him as the sign of His magnificent claim, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me though he die, yet shall he live" (v.25).

We may wonder why our Lord's ministry was so short, why it could not have lasted another five or ten years, why so many wretched sufferers were left in their misery. Scripture gives no answer to these questions, and we leave them in the mystery of God's purposes. But we do know that Jesus' prayerful waiting for God's instructions freed Him from the tyranny of the urgent. It gave Him a sense of direction, set a steady pace, and enabled Him to do every task *God* assigned. And on the last night He could say, "I have finished the work which Thou gavest me to do."

dependence makes you free...

Freedom from the tyranny of the urgent is found in the example and promise of our Lord. At the end of a vigorous debate with the Pharisees in Jerusalem, Jesus said to those who believed in Him: "If you continue in My word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free...Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin...So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:31, 32, 34, 36).

Many of us have experienced Christ's deliverance from the penalty of sin. Are we letting Him free us from the tyranny of the urgent? He points the way: "If you *continue* in My word." This is the way to freedom. Through prayerful meditation on God's Word we gain His perspective.

P. T. Forsyth once said, "The worst sin is prayerlessness." We usually think of murder, adultery, or theft as among the worst. But the root of all sin is self-sufficiency - independence from God. When we fail to wait prayerfully for God's guidance and strength we are saying, with our actions if not our lips, that we do not need Him. How much of our service is characterized by "going it alone"?

The opposite of such independence is prayer in which we acknowledge our need of God's instruction and supply. Concerning a dependent relationship with God, Donald Baillie says, "Jesus lived His life in complete dependence upon God, as we all ought to live our lives. But such dependence does not destroy human personality. Man is never so truly and fully personal as when he is living in complete dependence upon God. This is how personality comes into its own. This is humanity at its most personal."

Prayerful waiting on God is indispensable to effective service. Like the time-out in a football game, it enables us to catch our breath and fix new strategy. As we wait for directions the Lord frees us from the tyranny of the urgent. He shows us the truth about Himself, ourselves, and our tasks. He impresses on our minds the assignments He wants us to undertake. The need itself is not the call; the call must come from the God who knows our limitations. "The Lord pities those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust" (Psalm 103:13-14). It is not God who loads us until we bend or crack with an ulcer, nervous breakdown, heart attack, or stroke. These come from our inner compulsions coupled with the pressure of circumstances.

evaluate...

The modern businessman recognizes this principle of taking time out for evaluation. When Greenwalt was president of DuPont, he said, "One minute spent in planning saves three or four minutes in execution." Many salesmen have revolutionized their business and multiplied their profits by setting aside Friday afternoon to plan carefully the major activities for the coming week. If an executive is too busy to stop and plan, he may find himself replaced by another man who takes time to plan. If the Christian is too busy to stop, take spiritual inventory, and receive his assignments from God, he becomes a slave to the tyranny of the urgent. He may work day and night to achieve much that seems significant to himself and others, but he will not finish the work *God* has for him to do.

A quiet time of meditation and prayer at the start of a day refocuses our relationship with God. Recommit yourself to His will as you think of the hours that follow. In these unhurried moments list in order of priority the tasks to be done, taking into account commitments already made. A competent general always draws up his battle plan before he engages the enemy; he does not postpone basic decisions until the firing starts. But he is also prepared to change his plans if an emergency demands it. So try to implement the plans you have made before the day's battle against the clock begins. But be open to any emergency interruption or unexpected person who may call.

You may also find it necessary to resist the temptation to accept an engagement when the invitation first comes over the telephone. No matter

how clear the calendar may look at the moment, ask for a day or two to pray for guidance before committing yourself. Surprisingly the engagement often appears less imperative after the pleading voice has become silent. If you can withstand the urgency of the initial moment, you will be in a better position to weigh the cost and discern whether the task is God's will for you.

In addition to your daily quiet time, set aside one hour a week for spiritual inventory. Write an evaluation of the past, record anything God may be teaching you, and plan objectives for the future. Also try to reserve most of one day each month for a similar inventory of longer range. Often you will fail. Ironically, the busier you get the more you need this time of inventory, but the less you seem to be able to take it. You become like the fanatic, who, when unsure of his direction, doubles his speed. And frenetic service for God can become an escape from God. But when you prayerfully take inventory and plan your days, it provides fresh perspective on your work.

continue the effort...

Over the years the greatest continuing struggle in the Christian life is the effort to make adequate time for daily waiting on God, weekly inventory, and monthly planning. Since this time for receiving marching orders is so important, Satan will do everything he can to squeeze it out. Yet we know from experience that only by this means can we escape the tyranny of the urgent. This is how Jesus succeeded. He did not finish all the urgent tasks in Palestine or all the things He would have liked to do, but He did finish the work which God gave Him to do. The only alternative to frustration is to be sure that we are doing what God wants. Nothing substitutes for knowing that this day, this hour, in this place we are doing the will of the Father. Then and only then can we think of all the other unfinished tasks with equanimity and leave them with God.

Sometime ago Simba bullets killed a young man, Dr. Paul Carlson. In the providence of God his life's work was finished. Most of us will live longer and die more quietly, but when the end comes, what could give us greater joy than being sure that we have finished the work that *God* gave us to do? The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ makes this fulfillment possible. He has promised deliverance from sin and the power to serve God in the tasks of His choice. The way is clear. If we continue in the Word of our Lord, we are truly His disciples. And He will free us from the tyranny of the urgent, free us to do the important, which is the will of God."