

2022.01.09 - The Way Of Jesus - Prayer & Solitude

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So What? We want to be like Jesus and practice prayer and solitude.

Feel What? Peace

Now What? Practice prayer and solitude.

VISION CASTING

We exist to create community together by inviting everyone into the Way of Jesus.

INTRODUCTION

We're beginning a new message series today through the Gospel of Mark, paying particular attention to the spiritual rhythms and practices Jesus had in his life. As we begin, I think it's fair to ask:

What difference does following God make in my life? How will my life be different and better than if I didn't?

The truth is, you're on the journey to becoming someone. No one is static in this life, even if it seems so. We may not take on a new set of New Year resolutions, or we seem stuck outwardly, but every choice, even to resist change moves us somewhere internally. It shapes and forms our character.

The question is: Do you like the person you're becoming? Does he or she make a positive difference in the world? Does that person you're becoming have the hope of

greater peace inside themselves? Is that person who God had in mind when he created you?

We're all being formed by the things around us. Some of us have been formed according to CNN or Fox News, Facebook and Snapchat, Apple and Android. We've been shaped by the classes we've taken, the books we've read, and so on.

All of us have been formed by our family of origin, by the people we work with, by what we see when we scroll on our phones. The consideration is how that gets us closer or further away from the kind of people God had in mind.

So, what does it mean to be a follower of Jesus and be formed by him? How do we take what happened in the Bible and follow Jesus in our everyday lives?

Transition: For this, we turn to the Gospel of Mark and the life of Jesus to see how he taught his earliest followers.

SOLUTION

The Gospel of Mark was written by John Mark, a follower of Jesus, but not one of the Twelve Apostles. His account of the life of Jesus was taken from the accounts of Peter and written down and distributed. It's the shortest of the four Gospels, and moves quickly in three acts. At times, it feels like there's a quick transition, like when Star Wars movies do the sideways swipe and cut to a new scene. We're going to begin just as that happens as the ministry of Jesus takes off:

Mark 1:9-22 (NIV): At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

In the beginning of Mark, we see one of those unique moments in Scripture where Father, Son, and Spirit are all interacting together. This is why Christians believe in the trinity--One God in three Persons, all equal in essence and purpose.

At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days [wilderness being a key theme in the ministry of Jesus, as well as John before him], being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him. After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Jesus of Nazareth was an itinerant preacher who heralding the coming of God's Kingdom to the earth. But not only was he a preacher, he also functioned as a teacher, who people looked to as a sage for guidance in understanding God's revealed will through their treasured texts. In their language, these teachers were called rabbis, which is a favorite terms Jesus' followers used to describe him. Rabbis were recognized master teachers of the

Torah, Prophets, and Writings--what we call the Old Testament books of Scripture--and were often asked to weight in on the Midrash, the scholarly teachings passed down through the generations concerning how to interpret Scripture.

In the Gospels, Jesus was often asked about traditions and how different teachers understood the text. He would often reply with his own clarifying thoughts, saying "You have heard it said..., but I say to you...." In doing so, we see Rabbi Yeshua teaching his apprentices the Way of the Kingdom of God.

Knowing this helps us understand the next portion of the text as Jesus invites his first followers:

As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." At once they left their nets and followed him. When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him. They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.

In the early days of his ministry, Jesus begins to invite followers to come along with him to learn from him. The

term disciple means "learner," someone who would take and apply the teachings of a rabbi. What's unusual about Jesus' methods is that typically a disciple would chose their rabbi but, instead, we see Jesus going around inviting people to join him.

Notice what Jesus is inviting them into. He's not asking them to do more, to stuff more into and already busy life. He's asking them to do less so they can become more. What Jesus asks for is a total commitment of their life and their attention. Make no mistake, this was a difficult decision. For young men to up and leave their family business was scandalous in an honor-shame culture. Though it look like there's some success in the family fishing business due to the presence of hired hands, when young men in this time walked out on what their fathers were vocationally training them to inherit one day, there could be great loss to the family overall.

One major factor to them is what Jesus represented to them. As young boys, all of these people would have undergone rigorous studies to learn and memorize the Torah by age 13. But those who weren't adequately prepared to continue on in their studies were cut for the program and sent to learn their fathers' trade. So, these fishermen were not the cream of the crop. But this rabbi represented to them a second chance at being included in what was a longtime dream to be learners and then teachers themselves. It was a tremendous honor for them and for their families to be chosen to serve and closely follow so--as a common idiom of that time goes--they would be covered in the dust of the rabbi.

Disciples of a rabbi would commit to three things:

1. To be with their rabbi
2. To be like their rabbi
3. To do the things their rabbi does

Brad Young, *Meet The Rabbis*: "The disciple is willing to endure hardship for his learning experience. ...In rabbinic literature the disciples of the sages neglect their business and sacrifice much to acquire Torah learning. The disciple is expected to serve his master teacher in caring for personal needs. By serving the master the disciple learns how to conduct his affairs in everyday life situation. He listens to his master's teaching while doing menial chores to assist his mentor. ...Torah learning is evidenced in behavior and a rich spiritual life. The disciple walks with God by living out in practice the teaching of his rabbi."

This may seem quite foreign and a bit extreme to us. If we're used to discipleship being about things we study and facts we memorize about God then, yes, it's confusing. Throughout most of Church history, if someone wanted to follow Jesus, those who were older and wiser in the faith would invite them to implement different practices. They would follow Jesus by doing the things he did, passed on from one disciple to another. But for us, "discipleship" carries a different meaning depending on our experience with how it has been done. In my early 20s asking an older Christian if he would disciple me--and he said no. He had

been hurt by the Shepherding Movement in the 70s, that places a heavy emphasis on discipleship to the extremes of control and manipulation. He said, "No, I won't disciple you, but we can hang out and I'll teach you everything I know about God."

Discipleship today looks different than it has in the past, and familiar to us is two people hunched over a Bible in a coffee shop once a week. Maybe there are some accountability questions, usually asked only one-way and not mutual. So, for many, **"disciple" is a loaded term which comes from a Latin translation of a Greek word referring to a Jewish practice.** Perhaps a more adequate term for us that matches the practice of following Jesus is "apprentice." We understand that an apprentice is undergoing training to proficiently acquire the skills needed to do the job at hand. We know that apprentice electricians train under a master electrician so they can safely handle things like rewiring a home.

No one would hire an electrician who read a manual, watched some Youtube videos, and listened to a podcast. Yet, this is often how we do discipleship in the Western Protestant Church in America. You can apparently be a proficient disciple and never have to be anything like Jesus! We won't replace the words "disciple" and "discipleship," but perhaps becoming comfortable with the language of apprenticeship would help us understand which it is that Jesus is asking of us.

What if we understood apprenticeship to Jesus as:

1. **Being with Jesus**
2. **Being like Jesus**
3. **Doing what Jesus does**

The entire point of this Christian journey we're on is to be in close friendship to Jesus, to have our character formed more and more after his, and to offer justice and mercy to those around us just as Jesus has done. It's simple, clear, and takes a lifetime of practice to master.

Where this might conflict with what we've been taught is to equal discipleship and church with memorizing facts about God. But we need to be aware that Jesus himself told us what it's like to be the kinds of people who only know things about God but never get around to doing what he's told us to do. Near the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, his greatest collection of teaching about life in the Kingdom of God, Jesus says:

Matthew 5:19 (NIV): Anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

And at the end, he says:

Matthew 7:24-27 (NIV): “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall,

because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

Transition: Let's look, then, at our first practice in the life of Jesus and how we can incorporate it into our own.

APPLICATION

Later in the first chapter of Mark, we read this:

Mark 1:35-38 (NIV): 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.”

Jesus' life was an ebb and flow of time alone and ministry activity. All throughout the Gospels, we see him being alone so he could connect with his Father and become centered and refreshed. And then, from that place of strength, he turns to address the needs of the people and preach in the power of God. We need to remind ourselves that Jesus, being equally God and equally human, had the same physical restraints and limitations that we experience. Jesus lived within material boundaries, and because he paid attention to them it gave him a longevity

in ministry so that he didn't burn out before he was able to complete his ministry at the cross.

The practice of solitude is an invitation to us extended by God to get alone with him and allow his presence to refresh us. To break our relationship to hurry and busyness and allow God's priorities become our priorities.

Thomas Kelly, *A Testament Of Devotion*: "We feel honestly the pull of many obligations and try to fulfill them all. And we are unhappy, uneasy, strained, oppressed, and fearful we shall be shallow. For over the margins of life comes a whisper, a faint call, a premonition of richer living which we know we are passing by. Strained by the very mad pace of our daily outer burdens, we are further strained by an inward uneasiness, because we have hints that there is a way of life vastly richer and deeper than all this hurried existence, a life of unhurried serenity and peace and power. If only we could slip over into that Center! If only we could find the Silence which is the source of sound! We have seen and known some people who seem to have found this deep Center of living, where the fretful calls of life are integrated, where No as well as Yes can be said with confidence. We've seen such lives, integrated, unworried by the tangles of close decisions, unhurried, cheery, fresh, positive. These are not people of dallying idleness nor of obviously mooning meditation; they are busy carrying their full load as well as we, but without any chafing of the shoulders with the burden, with quiet joy and springing step. Surrounding the trifles of their daily

life is an aura of infinite peace and power and joy. We are so strained and tense, with our burdened lives; they are so poised and at peace."

Also in solitude with God, there is an invitation to be transformed:

Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*: "Solitude is thus the place of purification and transformation, the place of the great struggle and the great encounter. Solitude is not simply a means to an end. Solitude is its own end. It is the place where Christ remodels us in his own image and frees us from the victimizing compulsions of the world. ...We are called to solitude where we can struggle against our anger and greed and let our new self be born in the loving encounter with Jesus Christ. It is in this solitude that we become compassionate people, deeply aware of our solidarity in brokenness with all of humanity and ready to reach out to anyone in need."

So solitude isn't simply a time to think our thoughts or listen to the birds sing. It's a place where we meet with God and become reintegrated and realigned with God's heart.

My experience of this is taking the first moments of my day to wake up when our house is still quiet and sit with God. And I just listen and try to pay attention to him. Often, it's ten minutes, sometimes more. And sometimes I take other times throughout the day to sit and be attentive to God. But all my times of solitude include listening prayer where I'm listening for God's voice, waiting for any impressions

he may want to give. And I'd say almost every time, there's an increase in peace, settledness, and joy that I experience.

I make sure to do this first thing, before I turn on any screens, or even before I read my Bible. There's something about prioritizing being close to God with no agenda that is deeply formative and personally impactful. I'll be candid: This is the ideal. There are often times when I'm still sleepy or when one of my kids curls up next to me or wants to have a conversation. So, I try to role with it as much as my Enneagram 1 will allow.

However we're able to prioritize solitude with God, we're training ourselves to be attentive to God's presence during the day. We'll find spare moments when instead of mindlessly scrolling on our phones, we'll find that our hearts are drawn to be close to God. There will be a drawing toward God that may, at first feel like work, but can soon become second nature.

Brother Lawrence (17th Century Paris), *The Practice of the Presence of God*: "You don't have to pray out loud; He's nearer than you can imagine. It isn't necessary that we stay in church in order to remain in God's presence. We can make our hearts personal chapels where we can enter anytime to talk to God privately. These conversations can be so loving and gentle, and anyone can have them. Is there any reason not to begin? He may be waiting for us to take the first step. ...Gradually train yourself to show your love for

him by asking for His grace. Offer your heart to him at every moment."

When we cultivate time alone with God, it turns into a lifestyle where we can take that solitude with us.

OBJECTIONS

You may be thinking, *This is easy for you to say. Don't you get paid to pray? Or, You don't know my life right now. It's crazy and there's no way I can afford to take a step back and invest in something like this.* But my argument is that you can't afford not to invest in time with God. The mindfulness industry is creating apps, books, and podcasts at a breakneck speed to help people caught up in the frenzy of their everyday life to help them not crash. And while people are forking over lots of money for mindfulness training, the secret to this is that Christians have been practicing this for thousands of years. And it's free.

INSPIRATION

Now, there is absolutely no guilt or shame in what I'm saying. My invitation to you today is this: Begin where you're at. This may be new to you, or you may need a refresher on this spiritual practices. Each week, we're going to offer an invitation to incorporate a new practice, and we'll give three suggestions on how to incorporate it for yourself, depending on where you might be in your journey. Our hope is that as we take up Jesus offer to be apprentices to him, that over time we'll find more and more

of these practices that help us be with him, be like him, and do the things he does.

CONCLUSION

Practice:

- Prayer & Solitude
 - Beginning: 10 minutes, journaling or reciting a prayer if needed
 - Baseline: 10 minutes each day, mingled with silence
 - Stretch: 30 minutes of silence and solitude first thing each day

Prayer Invitation