

Solitude

There's something present yet unseen in The Lord's Prayer. That is – The one who taught us how to pray *together* often prayed *alone*. He regularly practiced solitude.

The Lord's prayer is an explicitly communal activity, right? Even the first word gives it away: **OUR** Father. Give US OUR daily bread. Forgive US OUR debts as WE forgive those who trespass against US and lead US not into temptation but deliver US from evil.

So in our Focus Season for the past 5 weeks we've been talking an awful lot about prayer together and we've been praying together on Sunday mornings before service and we've been praying with our small groups and all in all – we've grown in our practice of praying together.

When we look not just at Jesus' teachings on prayer but also at his life of prayer and his example of prayer it becomes even more clear that Jesus expects us to be praying in solitude.

Faith requires both – a private prayer life and a communal prayer life.

I would even go one step further and say that our communal prayer life is fueled by our private prayer life. A Private Prayer Life is necessary for making a community's prayer life effective.

In other words: **the prayers of the church start with the prayers of the home.**

When Jesus teaches the Lord's prayer in Matthew 6, he first teaches this:

⁶ But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father in private. Then your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

When Jesus teaches the Lord's prayer in Luke 11 he does it only after He's finished his private prayers.

¹One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."

In both instances of the Lord's Prayer – it's preceded with private prayer.

Revival (a movement of God in and through His people) starts at the level of the individual.

AW Tozer puts it this **way**

One consequence of our failure to see clearly the true nature of revival is that we wait for years for some supernatural manifestation that never comes, overlooking completely our own individual place in the desired awakening. Whatever God may do for a church must be done in the single unit, the one certain man or woman.

You can't have a **prayer empowered movement** without a prayer empowered church and you can't have a prayer empowered church without prayer empowered individuals.

You say, "that's great. But that sounds like a formula." Show me in the Bible that Solitude is important.

Let's for a moment see just how crucial solitude was for Jesus:

In Matthew 4:1-11 Jesus spends 40 days in the wilderness after his baptism and prior to his public ministry.

In Luke 5:16 we're told that "...Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed."

In Mark 1:35 we're told that "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus Got up, left the house, and went to a solitary place, where he prayed." This happens after a day of healing many and before a long trip of preaching

In Mark 6:46 After feeding thousands and before walking on water, we're told "After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray."

Matthew 14:23 repeats the same event with a few extra details "23 After sending them (the crowd) home, he went up into the hills by himself to pray. Night fell while he was there alone."

In Luke 6:12 before choosing the 12 disciples we're told "One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God."

In Luke 9:18 before Peter calls him Lord. We're told: One day Jesus left the crowds to **pray** alone. Only his disciples were with him, and he asked them, "Who do people say I am?"

It happens In Luke 9:28 At the transfiguration "28 About eight days later Jesus took Peter, John, and James up on a mountain to pray." We're told a few verses later that the disciples fall asleep while Jesus is praying.

In Matthew 14:13 (after hearing that John the Baptist died) 13 When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.

In Luke 21:37 we're told Every day Jesus went to the Temple to teach, and each evening he returned to spend the **night** on the Mount of Olives.

In Matthew 26:36 Before his crucifixion, Jesus prays in a garden, a stone's throw away from the disciples. 36 Then Jesus went with them to the olive grove called Gethsemane, and he said, "Sit here while I go over there to pray."

Henri Nouwen says that "Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life."

I think Jesus would agree. Here's our Lord – He's called us to be His disciples and to follow Him and the scriptures are clear – solitude was a big part of Jesus' ministry.

So what is solitude?

It's intentionally setting aside time, limiting sensations and distractions, under God's leadership.

How do we do it? Let's talk about these three parts of this definition.

1) SET ASIDE TIME

And here's what that looks like

- Sacrifice sleep

Don't tune me out. Hear me out. I know that we love sleep and I know that we're busy and I know that we value selfcare. And so I know that we want to start putting a lot of caveats on this. But when I read about Jesus' life and when I set out to intentionally follow Jesus' way – one of things I'm challenged with is the obvious fact that Jesus was willing to not get his 8 hours.

I think there's two things that help here.

- 1.) **Don't think of it as a sacrifice.** I know I'm the one that used that word and I did so because I think something like "make God a priority" isn't as easy to visualize. The truth is though, I'm starting to dislike that word sacrifice when it comes to God because it usually implies a loss. Prayer isn't a compromise in which we do something we don't want to do in order to get something we want. I think it's John Ortberg that says prayer isn't a discipline it's a privilege. When's the last time you bought a coffee and said, "okay coffee, I'm gonna sacrifice this money to you because I think you'll be worth it." No. You buy the coffee because you want it more than the money. It's not a sacrifice – it's a pleasure.

Solitude can't be, "okay God, I'm gonna sacrifice this time to you because I think you'll be worth it so you better come through."

So if you want to practice solitude – see it as something you gain, not something you lose.

- 2.) **Don't think of it as something you're inviting God to.** It's something God is inviting you to. Often times we see solitude as us inviting God into our lives as if we're the hosts and the event coordinator. The truth is though – solitude only happens when God initiates. He's the one that convicts us, encourages us, or somehow or other moves us to pray. Every time we've sought God in prayer – it's happened because we've said "yes" to a prompting of the Holy Spirit. That's why the Catholic Church says that prayer is always a response to God. Every time you pray (whether you were sensitive to it or not) it was because God gently prompted you. And for me, that's special. That makes me want to keep my appointment with God. That makes me want to show up – He's calling me there.

- **Next, Do it often**

The Psalmist meditated day and night. Jesus often and regularly and even nightly prayed in the wilderness. Paul prays for Timothy day and night. Jesus tells us to ask, seek, and knock. The apostles devoted themselves to prayer. We're told to pray without ceasing. And the Lord's prayer was to be prayed daily. Solitude must be something we do often.

Consider for a moment what your life would look like if you **prayed an hour every day**, one day every month, and one extended weekend every year.

Here's my other challenge to you: **Live a life that requires prayer** and then pray accordingly. If you're not in ministry, you're going to find it hard to pray for an hour a day. If you're not sharing the gospel or you don't know non Christians, you're going to find it hard to pray an hour a day. If you're not in a small group and you're not intentionally caring for a select few members here at our church, you're going to find it hard to pray for an hour a day.

Live a life that requires prayer.

The next part of our definition:

LIMIT SENSATIONS AND DISTRACTIONS

As Jesus practiced solitude regularly we see a need in our own life to deny ourselves. Perhaps more than we currently do. Solitude looks differently at different times – for John Wesley’s Mom, it meant pulling her apron over her head in her crowded home. For others it means climbing a mountain or going in the backyard. For others it means going into a storage closet in your home. It might look like sitting in your car while it’s parked and just being with God where no one can hear you sing or talk or laugh and where no one can interrupt.

Wherever God is calling you, meet him there. But solitude makes the spiritual life easy and possible because it limits our distractions and allows us to focus and hear and perceive with our spiritual senses rather than our physical senses. So we turn our phone on mute or turn it off completely or don’t bring it with you at all. Make it hard to check your emails. Make it hard for something to interrupt you. Make it hard for you to turn to google when your thought wanders and you have a question you want to investigate. Make it hard for you to play video games. For some, this is why prayer walks can be so beneficial – when you’ve walked away from your home, you still have to walk all the way back home and you make it so that your main option is to spend time in prayer.

I had a theory – that limiting our sensations allows us to be more in-tune to the senses of our soul. So to put it to the test, I wanted to see what Helen Keller said about faith... She lost her sight and her hearing at 19 months.

“To one who is deaf and blind the spiritual world offers no difficulty. Nearly everything in the natural world is as vague, as remote from my senses, as spiritual things seem to the minds of most people. But the inner or mystic sense, if you like, gives me vision of the unseen. . . . My mystic world is lovely with trees and clouds and stars and eddying streams I have never “seen.” I am often conscious of beautiful flowers and birds and laughing children where to my seeing associates there is nothing. They skeptically declare that I see “light that never was on sea or land.” But I know that their mystic sense is dormant, and that is why there are so many barren places in their lives. They prefer “facts” to “vision.”

Aw Tozer once said something similar: “The soul has eyes with which to see and ears with which to hear. Feeble they may be from long disuse, but by the life-giving touch of Christ alive now and capable of sharpest sight and most sensitive hearing. As we begin to focus upon God the things of the Spirit will take shape before our inner eyes. (AW Tozer)

How do we hear the still small voice of God? How do we perceive with our spiritual senses? We’ve rid ourselves of distraction, now what? Here’s where we come to the third and final part of our definition for solitude.

UNDER GOD’S LEADERSHIP

Let’s break down the implications of this part of the definition.

“Under God’s Leadership” implies an audience of ONE

When Jesus talks about praying in our inner room, He's doing it partly because the pharisees were praying in order to be seen by others. Solitude implies that there's one audience – God. We're not praying to impress people or to live up to the expectations of others. We have one audience – God.

Under God's Leadership **implies that we're In God's presence**

Scripture says, in multiple places to "seek the face of God" – sometimes it adds "always." And what it means is, to be in His presence. To recognize that when you're praying – the Creator of the Universe is with you. We quiet ourselves, we focus, and I think it was Tozer who said once that you're not imagining what it would be like to be with God – rather, you're acknowledging that you *are* with God.

You know what Peter says the first time that he realizes that Jesus is more than a special human?

Luke 5:9 says When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" One moment he's fishing with a Rabbi and the next He's falling on the ground, worshipping, and confessing. He was with God the entire time but it wasn't until he took the time to realize it, that He finally acted accordingly.

I'm not saying that needs to be your attitude every time you pray – in fact, scripture tells us that we can approach the throne of grace with confidence. But what I am saying is that, in solitude, you slow down enough to appreciate and recognize who it is that you're talking to.

You know, in small group or something you might ask a question like, "What would you say if you could see God and ask him anything? But that's exactly what prayer is – it's getting before the creator of the universe and saying whatever you would say if you were truly before Him.

"Under God's Leadership" also implies that we need to let God dictate. As often as possible, don't have an agenda

The Church Fathers, used to say that theologizing wasn't for everyone. It required a special temperament. We don't like that. We think the priesthood of all believers means everyone in here should have equal say in what scripture means and who God is. In fact it's common in our day for people to think they can have true orthodoxy without true orthopraxy. They think they can truly know God without loving and obeying Him. But scripture itself tells us that God opposes the arrogant, values humility, that wisdom starts with those who revere God. That it's the sheep of the shepherd who hear His voice. That your prayers will be hindered if you don't treat your wife with honor and understanding. Theologizing isn't for everyone. If you want to learn it, you must also be willing to live it.

And so Saint Hilary said it best: **God cannot be known except by devotion.**

What does this have to do with solitude? Well, this means that when we come before God, in solitude, to let him lead – we can't have an agenda. We don't get to dictate what God wants to talk to us about. We don't get to dictate what we do and don't want from Him. We don't come to God in an effort to control the situation. We come to God humbly with open hearts and open minds and open hands – willing to receive whatever He may have for us. Whether that be conviction, rebuke, encouragement, challenge, a spiritual gift, a reminder of a past promise, a loving word, a discipline, etc. God can only be known through devotion and so we must let God be God and we must be devoted to Him and to His will.

Hilary compares it to reading. He says that you won't get the benefit of a book if you don't expect to receive from it more than you bring to it. If you only approach a book as a critic, you'll never allow yourself to be shaped by it.

"Under God's Leadership" also means not saying too much. Solitude involves an active but suppression of speech and mind (not total suppression but intentional suppression). Consider at Ecclesiastes 5:2

Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few.

James says that the tongue is like the a rudder of a ship. It's small but it controls where the ship is going. So part of letting God dictate during your time of solitude means knowing when to speak and when to be silent.

Lastly, "Under God's Leadership" also means: don't let distractions discourage you

Assume that God is leading: Instead of loathing the fact that at one moment you were praying and the next moment you were thinking about something else – consider it. For example if you were having what John Ortberg calls "a revenge fantasy". Explore it. God, why was I having a revenge fantasy? Is there something you're trying to tell me, God?. Is there some unaddressed need for forgiveness? God why did I start imagining what it would be like to be in this situation? Are you trying to point out my pride?

In Christian meditation – the key is not emptiness. It's attentiveness. It's devotion. It's conversing with God through the Holy Spirit. So we pay attention to our thoughts and even the wanderings of our mind.

Let's end with a challenge.

Time and time again in scripture we see God moving and acting on the behalf of the few and the community of those few are reaping the benefits of it.

Noah saves his family.

Lot saves his family.

Joseph saves his family and preserves the line of the Israelites.

Moses saves the Israelites and often pleads on their behalf.

Proverbs tells us that through the blessing of the upright, a city is exalted.

Ecclesiastes tells of a poor wise man that saves a city.

Nehemiah.

Daniel.

Ruth.

Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Time and time again God uses the willingness of a few for the good of their community.

I don't care if you don't have any scriptures memorized, I don't care if you're bad at Bible trivia. I don't care if you have a below average IQ. I don't care if you're rough around the edges and feel a little uncomfortable at church because of it. Maybe you're less physically able. Maybe you're not bold. You're not charismatic. You're not a leader. You're not outgoing. You're not confident. I don't care. That's the beauty of solitude – there's power in it and it's available for any of us to devote ourselves to it.

God can use you. And He wants to use you. And He's waiting to use you. You can be a powerful force for your community. You can be a saving force. You can be a transforming force. But it won't happen apart from solitude.

We all have people who need us to rise to the occasion. We all have family. We all have friends. We all have neighbors. We all have a Church. Today – accept the call to solitude.

Set aside time. Limit your distractions. Place yourself under God's leadership.

Will you accept that call today?