



Luke 5:12-16
Practicing The Way
“Solitude”

Rev. Brian North
January 26th, 2025

If you could have a couple hours, or maybe even longer, to do whatever you wanted, what would you do? And let’s say these couple hours or more are a week out, so you can plan. Would you watch a movie or read a book? Get some exercise? Get together with a friend for coffee? Invite a group of people over for a meal or to play a game? Throw a big party?

Our answers may vary, depending on how introverted or extroverted each of us is. And no matter what we might be naturally bent toward, we all need relationships with people, *and* we all need solitary time as well. The amount of each will vary from person to person, but we all need both. In a few weeks we will look at the topic of “community” and the relationships we have with other people, particularly in the church; so, for you extroverts, we’ll get there soon. This morning, we’re looking at its opposite: solitude.

And if you’re new with us this morning or you’ve missed the last few Sundays, we are in a series looking at nine of the habits, or practices, that Jesus employed in his life and that Scripture elsewhere encourages us to engage in as well. It’s a series designed to help us practice the way of Jesus so we’d live more like him each and every day, wherever we may be. So far, we’ve looked at Sabbath, prayer, and fasting. Today, as I said, is “solitude.” Let’s turn to **Luke 5:12-16**. This is God’s word to you and me today...

So, when we hear this word, “solitude” we might think of monks, or hermits, or wilderness retreats that go for days or weeks on end, or even a lifelong commitment. Some of us hear the word “solitude” and we think, “That’s what I long for. Sign me up for solitude, please!” Others of us hear the word and we think “Ugh! That sounds so *boring*. Get me to a party with my friends or new people to meet, as fast as possible!” **Whether you are attracted to the idea of solitude or not, we all need it.** In fact, we all experience it. Some research shows that the typical American adult spends about 1/3 of his or her waking hours alone.¹ So, on average, we’re getting opportunities for solitude to the tune of 35 hours a week or more (granted, a senior adult living on his

or her own experiences a lot more than a married parent with a couple kids who teaches in the classroom for a living).

As disciples of Jesus, however, it's not just about the quantity of hours, it's the quality and intentionality of them. Are we using any of those hours of solitude – and not even *all* of them, just *some* of them – **Are we intentionally using *some* of them to grow closer to Jesus, so we'd be in better relationship with him and live more like him all the *other* hours of each day?** Are we using solitude as Jesus did?

We aren't *always* told how Jesus used his times of solitude, except that he prayed. I may be wrong, but in the research I did this week, I think prayer is always part of his times of solitude. Sometimes we're told more. For instance, in his 40 day fast that we looked at last week, he was in solitude, and we know that he was led by the Spirit, he prayed, he fasted, he resisted temptation, he quoted Scripture in that resisting so he probably spent time contemplating the Scriptures. These are the kinds of things he did in that instance.

But sometimes we don't know for sure what he did besides prayer. However, I doubt he suddenly busted out his phone and spent hours doom scrolling social media or binge-watching Netflix or whatever the 1st century equivalents would have been. Jesus shows way too much consistency in his life to think he'd do anything like that. Probably prayer, Scripture meditation, communing with his heavenly father...maybe sometimes going for walks or just staring at the clouds or the dirt as he sat in the presence of God.

Besides prayer, one thing we do know that was consistent, is that the places he spent time in solitude were very similar. For instance, in that 40 day fast, Matthew tells us that Jesus headed into the desert, or the wilderness. **The word is “eremos” and it has a variety of meanings, though all fairly related: desert, deserted place, desolate place, solitary place, lonely place, quiet place, wilderness.** And in light of Jesus' 40 days there goes, we might think: isn't that just like the devil, to come at us when we're hungry, maybe at the end of a tiring day or week, and in a wilderness place where we're weak and vulnerable?

What we see in Scripture, however, is that for Jesus, the wilderness and the solitude of it, isn't a place of weakness, but a place of strength. This is where he is closest to his heavenly father – whether he's fasting, praying, meditating on Scripture, or just being in his heavenly father's presence. This is why we see Jesus go to the eremos, the wilderness, repeatedly. That's what Luke says in today's passage, in fact. That Jesus did this often.

For instance, in Mark 6:32 we see Jesus going to the “eremos” with his disciples. So, not solitude by himself, but none the less they go to the wilderness to get some rest together, but like a weekend retreat we might go to there was probably some personal alone time as well. It is right after this that Jesus feeds 5,000 people with a boy's lunch, then sends the disciples off in a boat while he goes off to get some more rest. The word “eremos” isn't used to describe where he went, but we are told that Jesus goes to a mountain top. Sounds like the wilderness to me, even if a different word is used.

In Luke, Jesus goes off by himself no less than nine times. We read about one of them this morning. And: **When Luke tells us in today's passage that Jesus often withdrew to “lonely places and prayed” (v. 16) the word for “lonely places” is “eremos.”**

Let me share one more. This is from Mark 1:35, so we're out of chronological order here. In fact, this is after his first day “on the job” as the Messiah, where he was up early, taught in the synagogue, healed Peter's mother-in-law while eating lunch, then up late healing the sick and the demonized. And here's what we read happened the next day: **“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” (Mark 1:35).** Same place: the what? “eremos” – the wilderness or solitary place. Do you see a pattern here? And this one was literally like 24 hours after ending his 40 days in the eremos. He went straight back out there, as if 40 days wasn't enough: It's not a place of weakness, but strength.

And what happens next is that Peter and some others come looking for him, ask him to come back into town and do some more healing and stuff because

word has spread, #Jesus is trending on Instagram, the New York Times and Vanity Fair and other media outlets are looking for interviews. Peter basically say, “Get back and let’s do things just like yesterday!” And Jesus says, “No.” He uses more words than that, but that’s the gist. Specifically, he says, “Let’s go somewhere else, to the nearby villages, so I can preach there also. That’s why I’ve come” (Jesus, in Mark 1:38).

You see: **It is in the wilderness, in times of solitude, where Jesus gets clarity on his identity, his relationship with his heavenly father, and his mission.** He comes out of the wilderness with a greater sense of who he is and what he needs to do before his date with the cross. It’s where he is replenished, strengthened, and nourished not just physically and emotionally, but spiritually as well.

And as we see in today’s passage, Jesus did this frequently. It was a habit, or a practice of his, and it was done with intentionality: to draw near to his heavenly father. I would suggest to you, that if Jesus needed this regularly, then most certainly you and I do, as well. **We need intentional time set aside – alone in solitude – to get centered in our faith, to stay on the straight and narrow path of “apprenticing” with Jesus.** Remember, Jesus isn’t just our savior, he’s our Lord. And so we don’t just follow Jesus, we are called and commanded to live as he lived. (“If you love, me you’ll obey my commands” as Jesus himself says in the Gospel According to John). We are to be his hands and feet. To be, as Tony Campolo was known to put it, “to be Jesus with skin on.”

I came across something this week from a Pentecostal-leaning pastor that wasn’t written about solitude specifically, but it applies and reminds us why we need solitude that is intentional in forming our apprenticeship with Jesus. He writes, “When followers of Christ lose their moral compass, it often stems from a subtle drift away from their first love—the Lord Himself. This loss rarely happens overnight; it is usually the result of misplaced priorities, spiritual complacency, or an over-reliance on cultural or political ideologies rather than the Word of God. Without a firm anchor in Christ’s teachings, their sense of right and wrong becomes shaped by convenience, personal agendas, or societal pressures rather than the Spirit of truth.

The impact of such a drift is far-reaching. It can result in a faith that is performative rather than transformative, where outward appearances are prioritized over inward holiness. Without a clear moral compass rooted in Christ's character, love is replaced by judgment, humility by arrogance, and compassion by self-interest. This creates a distorted witness to the world, one where the light of Christ is dimmed, and the salt loses its flavor.

Recovering a moral compass begins with repentance—a return to the heart of the gospel. It requires a renewed commitment to walking in step with the Spirit, immersing ourselves in Scripture, and seeking God's wisdom in prayer. It also demands humility to recognize where we have strayed and to allow God to realign our values with His kingdom. As we do, the Spirit recalibrates our hearts, renewing our capacity to love mercy, do justice, and walk humbly with our God.

This return to Christ restores clarity, integrity, and a faithful witness to a world desperately in need of hope and light" (Dr. Mark Chironna).

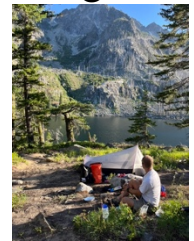
Everything he writes about here (bolded paragraph especially) is a work of God in the interior of our lives, and is sorely needed by Jesus' followers today. And in order for God to get inside and go to work, to stop moral drift, to get us on track with Jesus and living lives that look like his...in order to do that, solitude is needed. Time alone with God – in prayer, in his word, just being with him. Yes, Christian community is needed, accountability, service, corporate worship (don't make Sunday mornings a time of solitude – keep coming to worship!)...all of that...but without the deep reflection that comes from time spent alone with God, those things won't lead to a transformed life of living for Jesus, loving God and loving our neighbor. We need solitude with God to get there.

Now, this doesn't mean we always have to go out into the eremos – to the wilderness or a lonely place. But it can also be difficult to do when we're in our own homes with laundry to do, food to cook, floors to clean, and the television, computer, and phone screens beckoning us to consume more and more content. As my daughter, Hailey, mentioned to me a couple weeks ago,

there's a saying that goes **“If the devil can't make you sin, he'll make you busy.”** We need to set aside busyness and just be with God, and sometimes that means just being in solitude for a bit.



So, we can't always get away to the wilderness, but when we have those opportunities, they are golden. I recently had two. This summer I spent three days and two nights in the Enchantments **(Photo #1)** – it's a part of the Cascade Mountains just outside Leavenworth. You have to get a permit to camp overnight, and the lottery to get your name drawn is intense – people from all over the country try for years and years to go. I was fortunate to get my name drawn. I didn't go by myself, **(#2)** so it wasn't three days of *true* solitude – it was more like Jesus getting rest in the eremos with the disciples that I mentioned earlier; I took my three oldest kids. But we all had time of solitude, quietly sitting at the edge of the lake by our tents, **(#3)** staring at the mountains, the trees, the lake, just basking in the presence of God.



I brought a book along called, “Practicing the Presence of God” by Brother Lawrence...I read a good chunk of that book on that trip, and just tried to do what the title says **(#4)** right there in the eremos, the wilderness. (Look at that photo. Don't I just look like I'm soaking up the presence of God in the beauty of his creation?



A couple weeks later, I spent four days and three nights out at Ocean Shores – all by myself. I mentioned that one briefly a couple weeks ago in the message on prayer, but it was a time of solitude and just being with God.

But you don't have to be in a wilderness place like the ocean beach or the Cascade Mountains. A corner chair in your bedroom, or going to a park like Bridle Trails, or sitting on a public dock on the shores of Lake Washington, or walking on the Cross Kirkland Corridor...you can have intentional times of solitude in places like that. Having a few minutes each day, maybe an hour once a week, and then you might try a whole day or two every year or two or three.

I have quite a bit of intentional solitude on a daily basis, but the longer stretch of time like that retreat at ocean shores? I think I've only done something like that a couple other times in my life besides this last summer. One of those times, however, was a 10-month time of regular nearly daily solitude, when I lived in the eremos, in Ketchum, ID. I had a lot of alone time and started intentionally reading my Bible in my bedroom and seeking God. That was a big part of God getting a hold of me to become a pastor. If I didn't go into the literal wilderness for that 18-month stretch, I'm probably not standing here.

So, I speak as one who's got room to grow in this, but I've also had some powerful experiences of solitude. And the main purpose is to keep ourselves on track with God. Solitude is to get re-centered in our identity as a child of God and as a disciple of Jesus, so that when we're *not* in solitude we'd live like him and be on mission for him, shining the light of Jesus brightly, living with joy and kindness, compassion and mercy, while clinging to the truth of Jesus and his word.

And so: **My prayer is that you would have regular, intentional times of solitude to shape you to be more Christ-like, so that the people you interact with when you're not in solitude would see Jesus in you and be encouraged and drawn into a relationship with him as well.** May your times of solitude be times that, like Jesus', strengthen you so you'd bear fruit for him in your daily living. May they be the place where you remember your identity as an apprentice of Jesus'; may they be times to remember the calling God has upon your life; may your times of solitude be times of repentance and receiving God's forgiveness; may your times of solitude encourage you to live out your faith where you live, work, and play, for the glory of God and the building of His Kingdom. Let's pray...Amen.

¹ <https://www.apa.org/news/podcasts/speaking-of-psychology/solitude>