

This summer, we are talking about igniting our passion for God and the practices that help that to happen. I know of a church that talks about three kinds of people: the unchurched, the churched and the overchurched. The unchurched are people with no meaningful relationship with a church that encourages their hearts. The churched are the normally involved people in church life, like you and me. The overchurched are people who experience church—without experiencing God. There is no passion for God.

I remember Tony Campolo once was a speaker at a Jesus festival with hundreds of people gathering to rejoice in the reality of Jesus among us. The next morning, he was the guest preacher in a local church. The pastor gets up and begins the worship service by intoning in a very formal voice, “Let us worship God,” and a fellow sitting in the balcony who had been to the Jesus festival, upon hearing, “Let us worship God,” jumps to his feet and cries out, “Alriiiiiight!” Of course in that sedate worship service everybody was wondering, “Who is that!” I just love that this person wasn’t just “experiencing church,” he was eager to worship the Lord who loves him.

It’s easy to get into a humdrum routine coming to worship Sunday mornings, perhaps participating in some groups, and allow that routine to become an end in itself. Yet our heart’s desire is not just to experience church for its own sake but for the church to help us experience the reality of the Lord who loves us—it is to ignite our passion for God. It’s why I love the words of Chris Tomlin’s song, *In the Secret*. *In the secret, in the quiet place. In the stillness You are there. In the secret, in the quiet hour I wait, Only for You, 'cause I want to know You more....* It simply means re-centering on the God who loves us.

This summer, we are looking at a variety of spiritual practices that are all about igniting our passion for God, about trusting and experiencing the God who loves us. So, Pastor Pete has talked to us about prayer, fasting and generosity. If you have been listening, you realize that what he has been saying is immensely practical. The point of spiritual practices isn’t simply to listen to other people talk about them. It is to do them. That’s why they are called practices. So, we are asking you to get serious about your prayer life, to actually try some form of fasting, to invest more attention in things of lasting value by growing your generosity with actual dollars and cents. Do any of these and ignite your passion for God!

So this morning, we will be thinking about the spiritual practice of silence and solitude. It’s clear Jesus spent time in silence and solitude as a way of unplugging from the noise and hassle of daily life, as a way to connect with God his father and as a way to rest, to renew his own body and soul.

A friend of mine texted me recently and asked how I was doing. I called him and said, “I feel like Han Solo in the first Star Wars movie (technically Episode IV) where he pilots his spaceship, The Millennium Falcon, into an asteroid belt, so he is madly dogging the asteroids coming at him and trying to escape the Empire Battle Cruisers.” Sometimes stuff comes at you

really fast and you know there are consequences involved in the things you are doing and deciding every day.

Jesus had a lot of days like that. For example, in Mark 6 we read, ³⁰ *The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught.* ³¹ *He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.* They were so busy there was no time to even take a lunch break. And what did he do? He said to his disciples, “Come away to a deserted place.” Jesus did that all the time. He unplugged. Took a time out. He often went to a mountain or a garden or to a deserted place to pray.

So, in our text for this morning, we see Jesus in the small town of Capernaum. It was a Sabbath day. Jesus taught in the synagogue. He freed a man with an unclean spirit. He goes to the home of Peter and Andrew where he heals Peter’s sick mother-in-law. That night, the whole town showed up with their sick and oppressed and he healed them late in the evening. He goes to bed but he doesn’t sleep in. It was a long day. The next morning, he gets up early. The text doesn’t just say early, it says it was *very* early. You know he had to be tired; still he gets up and goes to a deserted place. I have been where traditional lore locates that place on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. It’s very peaceful. All alone, he prayed. Jesus knew in the midst of a busy demanding life he needed alone time. He needed silence. He needed to leave all of the noise in his life so that he could focus on God his father.

This was the regular pattern of Jesus. To engage our busy world and withdraw for silence and solitude. He did it over and over again. Luke says a disciple is not above the teacher but when fully grown is like the teacher. If the patter of engaging life and withdrawing for periods of silence and solitude is what Jesus did, then it’s what you and I are to be doing, too. It’s unplugging, taking a time out and stepping away from the noise of your life—all you are doing, your activities, your television, your texting, your social media, your whatever. I love the way Edward Bosworth put it, “What gets your attention gets you.” Take a time out to step away from all of the noise in your life so the God who loves you is the only one who is getting your attention. Remember, spiritual practices aren’t meant to be something you hear other people talk about, like I am doing now. They are meant to be done, that’s why we call them practices, and when you do them, you ignite your passion for God. So let’s look at some practical ways to take a time out.

The first practice of silence and solitude is a daily Quiet Time. Quiet Time sometimes goes by other names such as devotions or The Daily Office or the Morning Watch. I’ve long preferred Quiet Time because it is indeed a practice of silence and solitude. I am alone and I find a quiet place. Although I admit sometimes our living circumstances may make that a challenge. When we had small kids running around, the only place in the whole house that was actually quiet was the downstairs bathroom. It worked! Jesus’s Quiet Time was very early in the

morning and I prefer to do it first thing in the morning, but in your schedule it may work better mid-day or at bed-time.

During Quiet Time I do two things. I read my Bible. I like the pattern of a Psalm a day, a chapter of the Old Testament and a Chapter of the New Testament. I learned from a friend to write in the margin the date I read it and anything of note. Our son made a surprise visit last Monday and I jotted, "Lee here today" in my Bible by a Psalm. Now my pattern is just one pattern. Instead of a Psalm and chapters in Old and New Testament, you might just read a Psalm. Or a half a chapter. Glenda and Shannon produce these marvelous devotional guides that include texts from the Bible we are preaching on here. They are on our website—use them. And after your Bible reading, pray about the people and the matters on your heart. Take the time that works for you. Ten minutes? Thirty minutes? It's a time for you to re-center on the God who loves you.

One of the great devotional writers of this century, E. Stanley Jones, tells of being in the Himalayan mountains. "One morning," he said, "We arose at three thirty in the morning and, from our base camp, hiked to the top of a mountain 20,000 feet tall. As the sun came up, we saw before us a semi-circle of mountains arrayed around us, every one twenty thousand feet tall, each one covered with snow, a spectacular view and, for thirty minutes, we worshipped the God of heaven. Then mists began to rise from the valley below and soon the beautiful view was gone. But was it really gone?" he asked. "No, it was preserved forever in our grateful hearts." E. Stanley Jones went on to say that a Quiet Time of daily Bible reading and prayer was like that. We arise a little early and in the Bible and in prayer we meet the God of the universe, we re-discover the love of Jesus Christ, we receive some guidance for our lives. Then, as we go about our lives and the busy-ness of daily life begins to cloud our vision, we have preserved in our grateful memory the time we were with Christ in the morning and that memory and the knowledge of his presence and his love in every moment of life sustains us throughout the day.

Another practice of silence and solitude is simply to take walks or to go for a run. I would call it "walk" or "jog" with Jesus. Just remember you aren't just doing this only for exercise but to have a time of silence by yourself with your Lord. It's a time to pray. A time to sing a hymn or a worship song. You might work on memorizing a Bible verse. I do have a word about ear buds and music. Use them if the music inspires your heart but don't always use them. I usually walk and run without them. I want my mind truly free to pray and to reflect on the life I am living. So I want to major in alone time with my Lord and set the ear buds aside. It's hard to listen to my Lord when there are other competing voices in my head.

A third practice of silence and solitude is retreat. Jesus often went on retreat where he would go away into the mountains or into some other place for an extended time of prayer and of re-centering himself on his God. I have found this a very powerful experience—to take a half a day to a full day and go to a park or the Meadowkirk Retreat Center out near Middleburg. Take your Bible to read. Take something to write on to do some journaling. Take a reflective book

and simply relax into the presence of Jesus. If your mind thinks of things to do, jot them down so you know you've captured them and put the list aside. It's a day of reflection, and if you want to do some planning, hold it to the very end.

I do have one comment on location. Whether you are having a daily Quiet Time or going on a worship walk or going on retreat, the ideal location is where you may get away from the normal noise of your life. I know that isn't always possible. Suzanna Wesley used to sit with her apron over her head to pray. When her many children saw their mother that way, they knew they'd better not disturb her. But you know it wasn't quiet. Still you can find spaces in your life to be alone with Jesus and re-center yourself on him.

I find it interesting that while Jesus often lived and slept in homes like we do, that the instances of his practice of silence and solitude are always outside. Of the dozen or so descriptions of his time-outs, they are all outside—on a mountainside or a garden or a wilderness or a deserted place. The 23rd Psalm begins, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down. [In what?] Green pastures. He leads me beside [what?] Still waters. [And the result] – he restores my soul” – and that is what silence and solitude are all about. Restoring your soul and you re-centering on Jesus.

Jim Tozer was my boss, mentor and ultimately very dear friend. He owned a home on Glen Lake, Michigan where he and Vivian spent their summers. Jim loved to fish and he especially loved to troll for lake trout. One afternoon, he stepped into his boat. I remember when he bought that boat he couldn't decide whether to name it, “The Word” as in the Word of God, so he could tell people he was spending a lot of time in the Word, or whether to name it “Immediately,” since the Gospel of Mark says Jesus stepped into his boat, immediately! Anyway, one day Jim steps into his boat, sets two fishing poles out, each with bait trolling at some distance behind the boat. He sets the boat on a course across the lake and settles down on a beautiful day to do some reading in his personal Bible.

Absorbed in his reading, he didn't notice another boat with a man and his wife pulling up alongside him until they were right there. The man says to Jim, “Hey, Buddy, what are you doing?” Jim feels funny telling him that he is reading the Bible. “Oh, I'm just reading a book?” “Well, what book are you reading?” says the man. Jim hemmed and hawed for a bit and finally said, “The Bible,” and at the exact moment Jim said, “The Bible”, a huge fish grabbed the bait on one of Jim's fishing lines, the rod bent over double, and the reel whizzed as the line rushed out. As Jim drops his Bible and goes to grab the fishing rod, he hears the man say to his wife, “Hey, Martha, next time we go fishing, bring the Bible!”

One of the things I most appreciated about Jim was his genuine heart to be with the Lord. He wasn't in that boat because his primary goal was to catch a fish. He simply wanted to practice silence and solitude, to re-center himself on the Lord who loves him. He'd immerse himself in the Bible because he has learned that in the process of reading and enjoying and puzzling over

the Bible, the Lord met him, the Lord spoke to his heart and the Lord renewed his spirit. I am asking you to practice silence and solitude. We've looked at three ways to do it: Quiet Time, walking or running, and going on retreat. You can have a Quiet Time tomorrow. Just decide when you will do it. Bring our Lord into your walks and runs. Choose a time in the next month when you will go on retreat. Even half a day will re-ignite your passion for God and re-center your soul.

Offering Words

As we prepare to give our offerings to our Lord we simply remember that in silence and solitude our minds are free to engage the spiritual practices we are learning. The practices of prayer and of fasting. And now the practice of generosity, the gifts of the open heart to the God who loves you.