

“From the Ashes” Sermon Series Part 3-“Contemplation”

Scripture: James 4:8, Philippians 4:6, Colossians 2:2-4, Psalm 37:7, Matthew 11:28-30, Ephesians 1:17-18, Psalm 1:2, Psalm 46:10

Main Argument: In the busyness of life, we often neglect our connection to the source of life. Drawing near to God through contemplative prayer is the way in which we experience the nearness of God. This is an intentional practice that won't happen by accident.

Welcome to week 3 of our *From the Ashes Sermon Series* as we take a 6-week journey to the cross together. Each week we are looking at a different aspect of Jesus' life and ministry during His time here on earth. Each week we are getting a glimpse into the abundant life possible in and through Christ.

In week one we discussed temptation and last week we tackled Christ-like humility together. This week we take a look at one of Jesus' most powerful habits, *contemplation*.

There's a definition of "Contemplation" that I think helps to clarify our journey together this morning. While contemplation is generally understood to be "deep reflective thought" there is another definition that I think puts a finer point on it for our purposes.

One dictionary put it this way, "*(in Christian spirituality) a form of prayer or meditation in which a person seeks to pass beyond mental images and concepts to a direct experience of the divine.*"

For our purposes today, let's keep it simple and put the definition of "Contemplation" at, "Being still and quiet with God."

I mentioned a couple of weeks ago that one of the pre-eminent goals in my life was to have God's ear. To know I am whispering my prayers for you and others directly into the Father's ear. I am learning that this kind of access doesn't come casually or without some significant sacrifice. And it requires some intentional and volitional effort on my part. As I said a moment ago, this is an intentional practice that won't happen by accident.

Most everyone I know wishes they had a more devoted, more powerful, and purposeful prayer life. One of the major issues we all share is the busy pace of life and constant stimulation we experience. All of this seriously impedes our ability to slow down.

To be honest, it just feels awkward to *be still*.

I have often wondered about the behavior of recent generations and how to explain their constant flippant attitude toward things of the most tragic or serious nature. In short it seems that they almost always HAVE TO BE LAUGHING! Everything's a joke! Everything must have a punch line, a zinger, a one-liner. All the commercials on television aimed at young people are always boisterous and loud almost bordering on the obnoxious. We've even seemingly lost our

collective sense of humor. Have you noticed recently that many sitcoms, and shows endeavoring to provide comic relief aren't really funny at all? Have you noticed people laughing hysterically and boisterously at something that in your heart and mind you realize wasn't really all that funny? That the creative and genuine humor of yesteryear (Lucy, Bob Hope, Milton Berle) has been replaced with gutter humor and bodily function jokes? Cheap and tawdry laugh lines have displaced contemplation with brain-numbing nonsense.

It wasn't until I considered the apostle Paul's warning to Timothy that I realized this was a Satanic strategy.

Godlessness in the Last Days

"You must understand this, that in the last days distressing times will come. 2 For people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, 3 inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, brutes, haters of good, 4 treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, 5 holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power. Avoid them! 6 For among them are those who make their way into households and captivate silly women, overwhelmed by their sins and swayed by all kinds of desires..." (2 Timothy 3:1-6, NRSV).

The word, "silly" here can be translated "giddy" or "giggly" or "constantly busy laughing".

If Satan can keep us "constantly busy laughing" when will we take the Word of God seriously? We've become so preoccupied with looking for the next punch line that we seldom realize that Satan's "laughing gas" has anesthetized us from all reality and has become the narcotic of spiritual narcolepsy!

(Narcolepsy is a chronic sleep disorder characterized by overwhelming daytime drowsiness and sudden attacks of sleep. People with narcolepsy often find it difficult to stay awake for long periods of time, regardless of the circumstances.)

This brings Paul's admonition to the church when he wrote,

"And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. 12 The night is far spent; the day is at hand. Therefore, let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light." (Romans 13:11-12, NKJV)

One of the implications of Paul's words here is that by always looking for the next laugh line, we lose all track of time and don't realize the lateness of the hour or that we, even as Christians, have spiritually overslept!

(Illustration Idea: Invite the congregation to stand up in their places and start a counter for 1:00. Have everyone close their eyes and attempt to sit down when they think 1:00 has passed. The goal here is to see if you can have enough focus in quiet to correctly judge time. Reveal when the 1:00 is up and see how everyone did.)

It was hard to be still, even for a minute, wasn't it? That minute of stillness felt like half an hour to some of you.

On some level, this exercise draws our attention to the challenge of stillness, contemplation, and prayer generally. And specifically, that we are uncomfortable with being still and silent. Our lives are so loud, busy, and frantic, that many of us have grown accustomed to the noise and we feel out of place when it all stops.

But it will come as no surprise that the Bible has a different way for us. A more fulfilling way, and there are several principles we can put into immediate action that I can't wait to share with you.

So, here's the objective, that by the end of today's message you have a new-found desire to develop a peaceful, silent, calm place of prayer in your life as a believer.

For example, I think about Mark 1:35, where we see Jesus walk off into the desert early in the morning to be alone in prayer. (*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.*) Did Jesus sit in silence? Did He sing? Did He bring a laundry list of items with Him? Did He pray through His favorite Psalms? We don't know, but when I think about contemplation, stillness, and connecting with God I think about this verse, and it moves me.

Honestly, who doesn't want a powerful and purposeful prayer life? Who doesn't want all the fullness and adventure a life of discipleship offers? Listen to the way Richard Foster describes prayer;

"When we pray, genuinely pray, the real condition of our heart is revealed. This is as it should be. This is when God truly begins to work with us. The adventure is just beginning."¹

Prayer is an essential part of the adventure. Prayer is our most amazing avenue for connecting with the Lord. Think about this for a moment; *you are invited to speak -- on a regular basis -- with the divine creator of the universe.* Let that sink in...

Some of you are thinking, "But I don't know what to say, I don't know how to start, it seems so weird, etc...." In the words of Richard Foster again;

"I urge you: carry on an ongoing conversation with God about the daily stuff of life... For now, don't worry about 'proper' praying, just talk to God. Share your hurts, share your sorrows, share your joys --freely and openly. God listens in compassion and love, just like we do when our children come to us. He delights in our presence. When we do this, we will discover something of inestimable value. We will discover that by praying we learn to pray."²

¹ Foster, Richard. *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, Harper Collins, 1992. pg.11

² Ibid. pg. 12-13.

We learn by doing, and you've got to start somewhere!

Here are a couple of principles that I think will help you develop a more fulfilling and devoted life of contemplation, prayer, and stillness.

Lift your eyes up

Psalm 121:1-2 says;

*I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.
My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.*

The principle here is that there are times, each and every day, when we need to stop what we're doing and look up. We can get so laser focused on the thing in front of us, or the thing monopolizing our attention, and we forget about our relationship with the maker of heaven and earth. We can forget about His compassionate care over every detail of our lives.

"Looking up" causes us to change our perspective and focus on something else. Or in this case someone else...

"Looking up" can be critical to our survival. (Walking looking down, distraction on cell-phone, texting...)

Where were the eyes of the teenage girl who, as she approached a stop sign in Oklahoma this past week and "rolled through" the intersection and never saw the tractor trailer that sent her and five of her teenage friends into eternity? How many is Satan distracting today who don't realize that a lost eternity is bearing down on them as they stroll through a laughter filled life?

As you take time to stop what you're doing and look to God, you're reminded He cares for you, He is watching over you, and;

*"The Lord will keep you from all harm—
he will watch over your life;
the Lord will watch over your coming and going
both now and forevermore." (Psalm 121:7-8)*

I don't know about you, but I find this reality to be incredibly comforting. Here are a couple simple ideas most anyone can do to practice *looking up*;

- If you're feeling anxious or stressed, or if you need a little space to process a difficult situation, just simply take a walk. Get up, get out, and get moving. As you're walking tell the Lord about the situation, pray over it, and invite Him into it.

- Schedule a daily time to stop whatever you're doing, put away distractions, and sit in silent prayer. Put it on your calendar or add an alarm to your phone just to make sure you follow through.

These are just my ideas, but where do you feel at peace? Are there spaces in your life where you regularly get yourself refocused? Are there people in your life who can help you stay accountable to this principle?

Practice Stillness

Regular times of stillness and quiet are incredibly powerful for our overall health. This makes sense as most of us live very busy, very full lives.

Let's look at a couple verses from the Psalms on this point;

"Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." - Psalm 46:10 NIV

"For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation." Psalm 62:1 ESV

What is it about stillness and silence that helps us get reacquainted with the Lord?

Why does our soul... our inmost being... feel at rest there in the quiet?

Why is silence *sacred*?

I could ask dozens of more questions like this, but instead let's look at the story of Elijah and his encounter with the Lord in the book of 1 Kings.

"The Lord said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" - 1 Kings 19:11-13

The Lord wasn't in the wind.

He wasn't in the earthquake,

And he couldn't be found in the fire.

The Lord was there, in the gentle whisper.

Many of us lead such tumultuous and chaotic lives that it's few and far between when we actually have the space to entertain the "gentle whisper" of the Lord. But this is exactly why it's so important to make time for silence, prayer, and contemplation. We may think that all the

millions of things we're doing everyday are what's most important and valuable, but stillness tells a different story.

He's there waiting, are you willing?

As we finish up today, let's take a moment to be brutally honest about something.

And please take a moment to honestly consider what I'm about to ask you;

Is all your striving and all your hustle, all your appointments, activities, and action... Are they making you a more peaceful person?

Is the grind life giving you the kind of grounded faith you long for?

Are you sitting in an ash heap of unmet expectations, broken resolutions, and message notifications that you never have time to answer? When was the last time you spent some "facetime" with God?

As you think about those questions, I want to read you one of the most powerful and important passages in the New Testament;

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."
Matthew 11:28-30

It takes intentional effort in our culture to carve out sacred time and space to connect with the Lord. But wow, when you hear the words of Christ from Matthew 11:28-30 and you realize there is a space for your burdens, your exhaustion, and your chaos. What an amazing feeling, *what a savior.*

So set a reminder on your phone.

Carve out a weekend in the mountains.

Turn off all the electronic devices every night at 8pm.

Do whatever you need to do this week to make space for contemplation.

It's worth it, He's there in the stillness - in the gentle whisper.

Let's pray together.