



-- Illustration – Christmas Chaos

-- What comes to your mind when you think about Christmas?

-- Do you think about Christmas cards, candy canes, cakes and cookies, colorful candles, caroling choirs, camel costumes, and colossal crowds?

-- Is it about gregarious gatherings, gift giving, glittering garlands, gleaming gold, grouchy grinchs, and Grandma’s great gravy?

-- How about mistletoe, minced meat, mountains of mail, merry music, midnight mass, and maddening mall mania?

-- Do you think about pumpkin pie, parties ‘o plenty, picking poinsettias, pleasing people, posting parcels, picking presents, and presenting packages?

-- Is it about seeing Santa, swarming stores, searching for sales, stuffing stockings, seeking snow, sliding on sleighs, and singing songs while simulating seasonal spirit?

-- Or how about trimmings, turkey, trees, tinsel, traffic, trips, toys, tags, tidings, and traditions?

-- Whew! I don’t know about you but I am tired just thinking about it!

-- Video: Be Still – Christmas

-- Read Luke 4:42, Psalm 46:10

-- Pray

Notice what our two verses today have in common. In the first, we see Jesus engaged in a common activity of His—He retreats from everyone else to a find a silent, solitary place. We see this pattern of behavior revealed often in Scripture. One example comes in Mark 1:35, where Mark writes, “*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,*” and another appears in Matthew 14:13, “*When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.*” Indeed, not only do we see Jesus practicing the spiritual disciplines of silence and solitude,

but we hear Him commanding it as well in Matthew 6:6, where Jesus says, “*When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*”

The second verse, Psalm 46:10, magnificently echoes the same sentiment in one Scripture’s most beautifully concise commands, where God directs our hearts by saying, “*Be still, and know that I am God.*” The spiritual discipline of silent solitude is the focus of the message this morning, and there is likely no better time to discuss it than now, the season of advent, as we enter the often hectic and noisy Christmas season.

There can be no doubt that our culture is addicted to noise, especially during the holiday season.

-- Moving the TV around from outlet to outlet so that it could remain on while we were painting

It seems that everywhere we go we incessantly clamor for activity. As soon as we get home, we turn the television on so that its 200 channels can wash over us. We get in the car and the radio is ready to drown us in its songs, its slogans, its sound bytes, and its sales pitches. Moreover, I see so many people today, especially younger generations, who appear to be lost in a private world of constant commotion, wearing headphones on their ears, carrying i-pods in their pockets and swiftly sending text messages with their fingers. Who could deny that our culture is addicted to noise, entertainment, and activity?

And this clamor is not just self-induced. Our culture is a constant contributor. Most public places today tend to blare ceaseless sound through the congested air, squelching the silence and cultivating an atmosphere of activity. We even have music on the elevator to sustain our wandering minds for the duration of its thirty-second ride. And nowadays, have you noticed how many restaurants are positioning television sets in every eye line to entertain us while we eat?

-- Red Lobster – Mother and son—her reading a book and him playing games on his PSP, even while they were eating

Please don’t get me wrong here, there is nothing inherently wrong with headphones, cell phones, stereos, or TV’s. In fact, I am a fan of all of these things. Even more, I have often argued how effectively a little background music can be in fostering a more pleasant or lively environment, in certain situations. However, we do seem to go to great lengths to be in the presence of noise, don’t we? There can

be no question that we spend big bucks pursuing the clatter of entertainment and activity.

This discussion, then, begs the following question: Why all the noise? Well, this morning I want to suggest to you a two-part answer to this question of vital importance to our spiritual development.

The first part of the answer as to why I believe we insist on so much noise into our lives is that we have not learned how to handle silence and solitude.

-- Like me, when the girls get sick on the carpet. The whole thing is overwhelming to me; I don't even know where to start, and I have no desire to learn.

In the same way, our culture generally begins searching for an immediate escape on those rare occasions in which we actually find ourselves in the midst of true silence and solitude. It is likely true of many of us, and is certainly for our culture at large, that silence tends to create spiritual uneasiness and nervousness. In fact, people today seem so uncomfortable with being alone with their thoughts that they rarely, if ever, let it happen, especially at Christmas time. During the Christmas season, even if family, friends, shopping, and watching classic Christmas movies should fail, then thousands of television shows, radio programs, and countless other Christmas activities are all too willing to swoop in and fill up the void. And it is all too easy to choke the true spirit of Christmas with the noises such as unremitting music, continuous chatter, and endless hours of entertainment.

This discussion, of course, begs the question, why are we so uncomfortable with silence and solitude? I think theologian Henri Nouwen answered this question well when he wrote, "Many experience silence not as full and rich, but as empty and hollow. For them silence is like a gaping abyss which can swallow them up." In other words, I think one of our greatest fears about silence is that, when all the noise around us stops, we will find no inner music in our spirits to take its place. We dread sustained and silent moments with God—moments of sincere introspection and spiritual reflection—because in them we might be compelled to examine who we really are focus upon what we really believe. Thus, we adopt patterns of life that avoid the discomfort of silence, sidestep the uneasiness of solitude, and allow us to ignore deep spiritual introspection.

Let me ask you, how regularly do we search the depths of our spirits alone in silence? Do we embrace that kind of silent solitude, or do we fear it? With those questions in mind, I am going to suggest something that you probably do not

expect me to say this morning, and that is this: If we don't know how to handle silent solitude properly, then our fears about it are not totally unjustified. Allow me explain what I mean. This Christmas, you very well may receive a package containing instructions to "handle with care," and it will likely say that for a good reason: The contents are probably easy to harm if they are mishandled. Silent solitude is not much different, because, depending upon what we do with it, it can be a tremendous blessing or it can cause do significant harm.

For example, as I was contemplating this message, I stumbled upon two great proponents of silence and solitude. Here is a quote from each one:

- Friedrich Nietzsche – "The greatest events are not our noisiest, but our stillest hours."
- Aldus Huxley – "The more powerful and original a mind, the more it will incline towards the religion of solitude."

I hope that, in the names of the two quoted you can see the potential danger inherent in an unholy application or improper understanding of silence and solitude, because, these two persuasive proponents of silence and solitude are two of the most spiteful atheists that recent history has known. Moreover, especially in the case of Nietzsche, the evil, atheistic convictions that they held were born of and bolstered by the disciplines of silence and solitude.

Now, obviously, there is an enormous difference with us. Whereas the atheist's moments of deep, silent thought are unaccompanied by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, for those in Christ, our silent moments are inspired and directed by the gracious presence of the Holy Spirit at work within us. Nonetheless, even with the Spirit, our own thoughts, coupled with the unbiblical input of worldly influences, are prone to run away with us and carry our hearts off to unholy and unhelpful places. This is why in Scripture there are so many urgent warnings, directed at believers, about guarding our thinking and theology. For example:

- 1 Timothy 6:20 – *Guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge.*
- Colossians 2:8 – *See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.*
- Proverbs 4:23 – *Guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.*

With that in mind, as I was perusing Christian literature in preparation for this message, while some of it was terrific, I was a bit concerned with much of what I

found, because a good percentage of it seemed a bit naïve. What I mean by this is that much of what I read seemed to suggest that the mere act of going to a quiet, solitary place would bring about significant spiritual growth. But as the example of Nietzsche and many others can attest, silent solitude by itself will not bring about spiritual growth any more than buying a hammer will build a house. Both can be powerful tools, but both are largely useless, even dangerous, if they are not properly applied.

This, then, is the key to spiritual growth through the spiritual discipline of silent solitude—not that we do it, but that we do it right, we do it God’s way. And doing it God’s way is all about one thing—meditating upon God’s truth, God’s character, and God’s one and only Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. If, to us, the discipline of silence and solitude means simply retreating to a quiet space and dwelling upon whatever thoughts randomly come to our minds, then it will prove lackluster at best, and it could actually prove to be quite detrimental to our spiritual growth. If, on the other hand, silent solitude means extended meditation upon God’s infallible Word...if it means dwelling on His perfections, His power, His perfections, and His perfect providence...if it is all about conforming our minds to the mind of Christ and molding our hearts to the likeness of Christ...if our silent solitude is biblically applied, then it is a powerful practice indeed.

If what has been said thus far seems to apply to you—that is, if you have been avoiding the regular stillness of spirit that God commands of you because you have not known what to do with it—then hear this today: stillness of spirit begins by regularly retreating to a quiet place of intimate fellowship with God in which we discover who He is, worship at His feet, submit our lives to His will, and conform our hearts to the likeness of Christ. It means thoughtfully meditating upon God’s Word, // allowing the Holy Spirit to instruct us in its truth, and listening for the still, small voice of God in prayer. That is the essence of silent solitude, and it cannot happen in a crowd. It cannot happen with the TV blaring, or the radio blasting, or in the midst of people chattering. If Jesus retreated in solitude to connect with His Father in Heaven, how much more should we?

This brings us to the second part of the answer to the question at hand—that is, why is there so much noise? I think the second half of this answer goes like this: because we have never learned what to do with silent solitude, we do not appreciate its awesome value.

There can be no question that when the spiritual discipline of silent solitude is inexorably coupled with Scripture meditation and biblical prayer, it is an

extraordinary means of grace and a potent avenue to profound spiritual growth. Thus, it should come as no surprise that every great leader of the Bible seems to have been very familiar with silence and solitude, including Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, Paul, the Apostle John, and most of all Jesus.

Here are just a few Scriptures to emphasize the point:

- Psalm 131:2 – *But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me.*
- Acts 20:13 – *But we, going ahead to the ship, set sail for Assos, intending from there to take Paul on board; for so he had arranged it, intending himself to go by land.*
- Luke 5:16 – *But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.*
- 1 Kings 19:11-12 – *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.*

Over the past few weeks, we have talked about what it means to be rightly amazed by God’s grace. Today, I hope we all agree that, when coupled with Christ-centered Scripture meditation and biblical prayer, the discipline of silent solitude is a vitally important means of growing in sincere reverence and awe of God. I earnestly pray for myself and for all of you today that the awesome wonder, majesty, and joy of Christmas will not be lost to us amid the hustle and bustle of the Christmas season. Let us take this opportunity to “*discipline [ourselves] for the pursuit of godliness*” (1 Timothy 4:7). // Even in the midst of hectic lifestyles, let us find time to be alone with God. Furthermore, let us make our spiritual solitude will be as silent as possible. For, as Thomas Merton wrote, “It is absurd to talk about interior silence when there is no exterior silence.” Therefore, as often as we can, let us enter God's presence. Let us be as still as we can be and make our environment as quiet as possible; let us foster an environment in which we can meaningfully meditate upon God’s Word and carefully listen to the still, small voice of God.

In conclusion, I pray that, through the discipline of silent solitude, our attitudes this Christmas will resemble like that which Mary exemplified on the very first Christmas. Listen to her response to the events of that first Christmas day: Luke 2:19 – “*Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.*” As

we see in her, and, best of all, as we have seen in Jesus Christ Himself, I pray that this Christmas season will mark the beginning of a spiritual life in which we habitually honor the command we have received in Psalm 46:10. I pray that we will “*Be still, and know that [He] is God; that [He] will be exalted among the nations, and that [He] I will be exalted in the earth.*” Let us make sure that we take time to be still this Christmas season.