

The Spiritual Habits of Jesus Series

Jesus' Habit of Solitude

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At A Glance:

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These sermon study notes are designed to be a tool used after listening to the sermon. This resource is a guide to help deepen understanding regarding the Scriptures and ideas presented in the sermon. Those who use these study notes are encouraged to look up, read through, and think about Scripture references in this guide. There is more information in these notes than what is presented in the sermon. These study notes are designed to be used as an independent study tool to help the formation of Biblical convictions, character, and conduct.

Jesus' Habit of Solitude

I. Introduction

A. Illustration: Internal Emptiness

1. We have an epidemic on our hands. No, I'm not still talking about Covid. I'm talking about living with an empty and unhealthy soul. Empty souls are the true pandemic. It won't take much to demonstrate this point. Anyone who is paying the slightest attention to what is happening around them will see this. Don't believe me?
2. Let me ask you a few questions. Considering all our material prosperity, ease of life, and modern conveniences, why are so many mental and emotional conditions increasing? Look at the people you know: your family, friends, coworkers, and neighbors. Would you say most are thriving in life? Are they positive and hopeful? How many are dealing with significant issues? Are they responding well to those issues? Do they have the resources to care for themselves, let alone others? As I look around, I see people who are hurting and struggling.
3. Suicide has touched many people's lives in the community. Everyone knows someone who is depressed. People are struggling to cope with life. Many view the next day as another one to have to endure and survive while joy is gone. There is a desperate search for help that will provide mental and emotional relief.
4. People are looking for hope, encouragement, and support, which is a good thing. This is an instinct that God gives to us so that we might search for Jesus. Notice the intuition though: people are looking outside of themselves because they realize they don't have what they need from within. Individuals are looking for something outside themselves that will fill and satisfy them on the inside. Unfortunately, everyone looks in the wrong places such as other people, relationships, money, sex, entertainment, experiences, drugs, alcohol, and many other places for internal satisfaction.
5. Statistically, one in five US adults are dealing with some diagnosable mental disorder.¹ All of this seems to be a consequence of the modern self-focused, materialistic lifestyle. Apparently, we are not living in a healthy way that causes human flourishing.
6. At the risk of oversimplification, what can be done about all of this? One of the most important solutions to promote life and healing in people's lives is to teach them how to care for their long-neglected soul. Starving people, whether physically or spiritually, will not be healthy. Like Jesus, we are to have compassion for the crowds who are "distressed and dispirited" (Mt. 9:36). The internal angst people feel is a spiritual problem that requires a spiritual solution.

- B. While this paradox may seem to be a modern problem, that isn't the case. We see this same spiritual dynamic happening throughout the history of humanity. This general pattern has been repeated: as people gain material wealth, they lose spiritual health. While it may be hard to imagine this relationship, the Bible and Jesus Himself state this reality directly. There are

¹ [About Mental Health \(cdc.gov\)](https://www.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/)

exceptions to this dynamic: there are rich people who are also spiritually healthy, but as a rule, this pattern holds true across time and culture.

- C. Two examples come from Jesus addressing the health and condition of the churches in the Roman province of Asia. The church in Laodicea had financial wealth, which is why Jesus said:
¹⁷ Because you say, “I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,” and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, ¹⁸ I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and *that* the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. (Rev. 3:17-18)
- D. The true riches Jesus is talking about are spiritual, not financial. As money increases, so does human pride. Jesus addressed the same issue from the other side when evaluating the church in Smyrna who was poor financially, yet Jesus evaluated them as “rich” regarding spiritual things (Rev. 2:9). Also remember the rich fool (Lk. 12:13-21). A major contributing factor to the lack of spiritual health is our financial prosperity. We no longer see our deep spiritual need for Jesus. In fact, many people see Jesus as completely irrelevant because they already have everything they need. On their view, Jesus doesn’t contribute anything meaningful to their life. He is simply unnecessary except for those who are weak or can’t handle life on their own.²
- E. Jesus lived a healthy and spiritually productive life. He helped many with their personal issues throughout His ministry. Disciples can learn to live well, without an empty soul, through Jesus’ example. In this new series, we will be looking at the spiritual habits of Jesus so that we can implement them ourselves to live a more spiritually healthy lifestyle. The first spiritual habit that we will notice is that of solitude, a practice our modern culture greatly neglects.

II. Command to Stay Connected to Jesus

- A. If a person is going to follow Jesus, and if disciples are going to teach others to obey the commands of Jesus, they will be determined to live their lives in a way that enables them to stay continually connected to Jesus. The Christian life is made up of habits that promote spiritual life and help build the kingdom of God on earth. One such spiritual habit (also called a spiritual discipline) that the church has long recognized is that of solitude—the practice of being alone in the presence of God.³ The earliest disciples who lived with Jesus observed how Jesus lived and picked up on His lifestyle habits and heard His teachings which promoted the practice of solitude:

⁴ Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither *can* you unless you abide in Me. ⁵ I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. ⁷

² Many people only start to care about Jesus when their internal angst because too great to manage on their own. Even then, it is more common to seek out relief than Jesus.

³ For more on spiritual disciplines see Donald S. Whitney, [*Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*](#) (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1991)

If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples. ⁹ Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. ¹⁰ If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. (Jn. 15:4-10)

- B. In this passage, Jesus strongly promotes the idea of continual fellowship and connection between Him and His disciples.⁴ He mentions three aspects of doing this through His Word, prayer, and obedience, which is contrasted from being apart from Him. The verb “Abide” is in the active present tense imperative, which means staying connected to Jesus is a continuous action that disciples carry out for themselves as a requirement of obeying Jesus.⁵ This is what Jesus means when He says, “Abide in Me” (v. 4). Jesus then uses the familiar imagery of a grape vine to visualize what He means in the spiritual realm. Jesus doesn't just command disciples to stay attached to Him over time; He says this is a piece of evidence that indicates belonging to Him (“if anyone does not abide in Me...cast them into the fire” v. 6). Jesus is most likely referring to hell here. For Jesus, staying connected to Him throughout life is a salvation issue. If individuals live their lives distant from Jesus, this reveals their spiritual condition.
- C. Those who do stay attached to Jesus will demonstrate that connection as they, “bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples” (v. 8). One method of bearing fruit is answered prayer (v. 7), since disciples are incapable of being spiritually fruitful by themselves (v. 5). The means of having answered prayer and abiding in Jesus is to, “keep My commandments” (v. 10). Disciples who do all this not only stay connected to Jesus, but they also remain “in My [Jesus'] love” (v. 9).
- D. Jesus provides not only the command, but a means of fulfilling the command, when He says, “you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love.” (v. 10). Jesus gives us an example and model of how to remain connected to Him just as He remained connected to the Father. Jesus presents Himself as the pattern to follow. As Jesus mentions, He did this largely through obedience. However, I think we can take this principle of Jesus' example of a deep connection with the Father a step further and use Jesus' spiritual habits as a way of staying connected to Him the way He stayed connected to the Father. Every action of Jesus was influenced by an intimacy and personal acquaintance with the Father. Jesus connected to the Father in more ways than just obedience, even though that is the only one He mentions in this context. We will be looking at the spiritual habit of solitude, which was clearly an important part of how Jesus stayed connected to the Father.
- E. The purpose of this command, as one author puts it, is, “The Jesus habit of seclusion is withdrawing, momentarily or for an extended period of time, from everyday noise and demands, to spend some time with God for the purpose of connecting with God and allowing your emotional and spiritual batteries to be recharged.”⁶ I would also add the purpose of

⁴ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, vol. 36, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1999), 272.

⁵ Abide means to continue a certain state, condition, or activity. Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on John 15:4 “Abide”

⁶ Jay Dennis, *The Jesus Habits: Exercising the Spiritual Disciplines of Jesus* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2005), Kindle location 92.

sanctification—the growth and development of the soul which results in a transformed life and spiritual maturity.⁷ The care of our soul is the most important priority in our lives. While few seem to recognize this in our busy action-oriented, achievement-focused modern culture, this priority is firmly established, whether it is recognized or not. One of the greatest problems of modern life is the neglect and starvation of the soul. Too many people run through life so accustomed to an empty soul that they can't even imagine life any other way—there isn't an awareness of the need.

- F. This is what J.P. Moreland calls “empty selves”.⁸ As he describes seven traits of the empty self, the modern person is described as, “a hurried, busy self-gorged [person] with activities and noise along with deep emotional emptiness and hunger with inadequate strategies to fill that emptiness.”⁹ Unfortunately, given the perspective a lot of people have today, when we come into contact with this sense of internal emptiness and a lack of resources, people commonly turn to more self-indulgent activities. If what a person is currently doing is not enough, they think they must not have enough. The problem is that self-indulgent activities almost always make the problem worse, not better. The reason? Because we need something outside of ourselves to pour life into our soul. We need God to fill us with His life through the Holy Spirit. The spiritual habit of solitude provides what we need. As Jesus put it, individuals need to “lose their life for my sake” to “find it” (Mt. 16:25). The solution to this problem of internal emptiness is not inside us but outside us.¹⁰ We must learn to abide in Jesus.

III. Jesus' Habit of Solitude

- A. By paying careful attention to Jesus, we will notice He made spending time alone with God the Father a priority in His life. The first example comes on the heels of a very busy and presumably late night of ministry:

⁴⁰ While the sun was setting, all those who had any *who were* sick with various diseases brought them to Him; and laying His hands on each one of them, He was healing them. ⁴¹ Demons also were coming out of many, shouting, “You are the Son of God!” But rebuking them, He would not allow them to speak, because they knew Him to be the Christ. ⁴² When day came, Jesus left and went to a secluded place; and the crowds were searching for Him, and came to Him and tried to keep Him from going away from them. (Lk. 4:40-42)

- B. Jesus is surrounded by people who are demanding His time and attention. He is surrounded by suffocating needs. People are seeking Him out. Jesus had worked late into the evening as He started healing people “while the sun was setting” (v. 40). This indicated the Sabbath (a day of rest from work) was over, so people started to approach Jesus. In essence, they were telling

⁷ “Solitude is the Spiritual Discipline of voluntarily and temporarily withdrawing to privacy for spiritual purposes.” Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1991), 184 and “Solitude is the discipline that calls us to pull away from life in the company of others for the purpose of giving our full and undivided attention to God.” Ruth Haley Barton, “Solitude,” ed. Glen G. Scorgie, *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 762.

⁸ J.P. Moreland *Love Your God with All Your Mind: The Role of Reason in the Life of the Soul* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2012), 101.

⁹ J.P. Moreland *Love Your God with All Your Mind: The Role of Reason in the Life of the Soul* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2012), 106

¹⁰ To learn more about how to do this see J.P.'s Moreland's previously mentioned book along with his very helpful book *The Lost Virtue of Happiness: Discovering the Disciplines of the Good Life*. While modern people get happiness wrong, Jesus did not as He had, “joy above Your fellows” (Ps. 45:7) and Jesus wanted to give to the disciples so that, “your joy may be made full” (Jn. 15:11).

Jesus to get to work as soon as He could once the sun started to go down, which ends the day of rest. Jesus worked into the night after it got dark. We don't know exactly how late Jesus worked, but the text seems to indicate it was a long way into the night as, "all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to Him" (v. 40). It appears this group of people was large as they are called "the crowds" (v. 42). Mark refers to this group as, "the whole city had gathered at the door" (Mk. 1:33).

- C. Despite the late night and the fact that more people were looking for Jesus the next day, in the middle of this large workload, Jesus intentionally, "went to a secluded place" (v. 42). Jesus purposefully got away by Himself. He sought out privacy. Jesus went to a place where there weren't any other people. He had a habit of solitude. Further, we learn Jesus did this "in the early morning, while it was still dark" (Mk. 1:35). Jesus "got up" (Mk. 1:35), "left the house" (Mk. 1:35), and "went away to a secluded place" (Mk. 1:35). Apparently, Jesus didn't get much sleep as He worked late into the darkness and got up before it was light. In other words, Jesus had to sacrifice to make time to be alone with the Father, yet He made it a priority despite all the other demands on His time.
- D. Continuing to examine Jesus' habit of solitude, we notice this pattern of getting away from people repeated itself on many occasions. This time, "it was evening" and "the hour is already late" (Mt. 14:15). This wasn't a one-time act for Jesus, but a consistent pattern. After teaching and feeding yet another crowd:
- ²² Immediately He made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of *Him* to the other side, while He sent the crowds away. ²³ After He had sent the crowds away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone. (Mt. 14:22-23)
- E. Once again, we see Jesus intentionally moving away from people to spend time alone with the Father, including both the disciples ("He made the disciples get into the boat" (v. 22) and the crowd, "He sent the crowds away" v. 22). What did Jesus do next? He spent more time in solitude, "by Himself" (v. 23) and "it was evening, He was there alone." (v. 23). Jesus had to catch up to the disciples and get ready for another busy day in the morning. Jesus had every excuse at His disposal, if He wanted to use them, to skip spending time alone with the Father. Yet, He didn't do that. He regularly invested extra time in His already hectic schedule to spend time alone with God. Solitude doesn't seem to be a privilege but a necessity for Jesus. In fact, Jesus would, "often slip away to the wilderness" (Lk. 5:16). Time alone with the Father was a permanent fixture in the life of Jesus. It was a spiritual habit He carried out consistently, even on the very last night of His earthly life (Mt. 26:36-46, Mk. 14:32-42, Lk. 22:39-46, Jn. 18:1), knowing He was about to die.
- F. It will be very helpful for you to learn as much as you can about Jesus' spiritual habit of solitude so that you can follow His example. Here is a list of passages that highlight Jesus spending time alone with the Father. Look up each example and read how Jesus participates in the habit of solitude: when being tempted (Mt. 4:1-2, Mk. 1:12-13, Lk. 4:1-2), during His busy ministry (Mk. 1:35, Lk. 4:42-43, Mt. 14:23, Mk. 6:45-51, Lk. 6:12, Jn. 6:15), after hearing about John the Baptist's murder (Mt. 14:13-14), with the disciples after they returned (Lk. 9:10), while praying

(Mt. 16:13, Mk. 8:27-28, Lk. 9:18), the transfiguration (Mt. 17:1-8, Mk. 9:2-8, Lk. 9:28-36), in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mt. 26:36-46, Mk. 14:32-42, Lk. 22:39-46, Jn. 18:1)

- G. As you read through and observe each passage, try to find as many answers to the following questions as you can (every passage will not answer every question):
1. When did Jesus spend time alone?
 2. What was the situation or circumstance Jesus was in?
 3. Where did Jesus go to be alone?
 4. What did Jesus do when alone (specific activities)?
 5. How long was Jesus by Himself (duration)?

IV. How to Practice Solitude

- A. Now that we know how important the spiritual habit of intentionally spending time alone with God was to Jesus, we can progress to the topic of discovering how to practice this spiritual habit ourselves. If someone wants to learn how to take the first steps in doing solitude themselves, what might that look like? A simple and basic method that can be used for those who want to practice solitude will be provided.
- B. The spiritual habit of solitude can also be referred to as a “quiet time” or having a “devotional time”.¹¹ All three of these expressions refer to the same habit of personally spending time alone with God for the purpose of developing a healthy and intimate connection with God. While there can be a variety of specific activities used during a time of solitude with God, some of the most common spiritual practices include prayer, detachment, Bible reading, Bible study, Bible application, meditation (directing your thoughts toward Scripture), Bible memorization, personal worship, journaling and using a devotional guidebook. There is no one way to spend time with God.¹² Instead, there is great flexibility in methods and structures. The goal is to find a way to spend meaningful time with God that strengthens and develops your soul in a sustainable way given your life context. In other words, find something that works for you and helps you draw closer to God!
- C. Bill Hull, in his very helpful book *Jesus Christ, Disciplemaker*, provides an insightful observation about maintaining regular times of solitude with God: “The battle for spending meaningful time with God is fought on three fronts: priorities, scheduling, and discipline.”¹³ Each of these three challenges will need to be overcome if a regular and consistent habit of solitude is going to become a normal part of your life. Creating enough space for solitude may require eliminating something else from your life. The sacrifices are worth it. The nourishment and spiritual life will benefit you far more than anything that is lost. Over time, if you practice solitude effectively, you will experience this yourself and you won’t be disappointed. The kingdom of God is a treasure that is more valuable than anything we currently possess (Mt. 13:44).

¹¹ How can a disciple expect to be different from the world if they are constantly saturated in and surrounded by the world? The spiritual habit of solitude is a means by which disciples of Jesus distinguish themselves from those around them.

¹² For more on how to practice solitude see George Swinnock, *The Works of George Swinnock, M.A.*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh; London; Dublin: James Nichol; James Nisbet and Co.; G. Herbert, 1868), 403.

¹³ Bill Hull, *Jesus Christ, Disciplemaker*, 20th Anniversary Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 217.

- D. The main focus of solitude is your own spiritual health and your relationship with God. Many disciples have found a popular basic method of spending time with God called SOAP. SOAP is an acronym that stands for scripture, observation, application, and prayer. As soap cleans the body, so this order of activities when used in solitude cleans the soul. The flexibility of SOAP is very helpful. This method can be used in short periods of time, such as fifteen minutes, and it can be used for long periods of solitude, such as a few hours. This method of time with God can be used by both new Christians and experienced ones.
- E. This method of time with God begins by selecting a passage of Scripture that will be the focus of each time of solitude. Many people find it helpful to journal or write down their devotional times by having a written record of what they do and what they learn. Under the heading of Scripture, it is good to write down the passage of Scripture being focused on.
- F. Next, the disciple will read through the passage, possibly even several times if it is a shorter text, and record what they see. Try to answer the question: what do I see in this passage? Remember the focus of solitude: your own spiritual health and your connection to God. Pay attention to the elements of the text that most directly connect to the current condition of your soul along with healthy versus unhealthy ways of responding to God. Look for people who can serve both as positive or negative examples.
- G. Once you have spent sufficient time examining the text, move to application by answering the question: In what ways can I apply this Scripture to my life? Think about your present context and the situations you are facing. Find elements of God's Word that can be useful to you right now. Perhaps there is divine wisdom and advice that can help you navigate your circumstances. Strive to use what you've learned.
- H. Lastly, it can be productive to document a prayer that you can use the rest of the day or week that utilizes some aspect of the passage of Scripture or your application. The prayer should flow directly from the rest of the devotional time. Praying Scripture is a healthy practice that can help encourage deeper levels of prayer.
- I. If you want to use the SOAP method for your times of solitude and you haven't set aside a regular amount of time each day to be with God, be encouraged to spend fifteen minutes a day using this strategy.¹⁴ Don't make the mistake of biting off more than you can chew at the beginning and trying to spend an hour a day in solitude only to give up a week later. Make a realistic and sustainable solitude plan. Start small. Over time, you can always add additional time spent with God. If, after a few months, you discover fifteen minutes a day isn't enough, increase your daily time to a half hour. Then build from there.
- J. One final recommendation for those who may want a guidebook that can help them spend daily time alone with God is a book authored by Jonathan Gibson titled *Be Thou My Vision: A Liturgy for Daily Worship*. This resource combines several of the solitude activities mentioned at the beginning of this section using some of the resources from church history. It includes a pattern that repeats monthly as well as a yearly Bible reading plan. This book is a rich resource that can provide a lot of spiritual food and nourishment. This tool is an easy to use, no

¹⁴ A document that includes a weeklong journal for recording your SOAP notes can be found on the church's app. You can download or print this tool anytime.

preparation necessary resource. All a person must do is pick it up and read. Everything else is done for them. If you find this tool helpful, great! If not, find something else that works for you.

V. Conclusion

- A. Spending time alone with God the Father was a high priority for Jesus. This priority and value was firmly in place in His life for good reasons. We would be wise to follow Jesus' example. He knew how to live life abundantly in a way that pleases God. Jesus' life is so impressive that we are still talking about it thousands of years later!
- B. It is impossible to grow spiritually or make a lasting impact on others for the kingdom of God without first staying connected to Jesus. The spiritual habit of solitude is a critically important lifestyle practice that helps disciples become spiritually fruitful. Daily being alone with God should be a permanent feature of the life of every disciple. We can't be healthy without it.

VI. Questions for Further Thought

- A. When you can spend time alone with God, what do you do? Do you use any resources? If so, which ones?
- B. What does Jesus say about Mary in Lk. 10:38-42? What is Jesus prioritizing? How is this related to the spiritual habit of solitude if it is?
- C. In what ways do modern culture and church discourage private times of solitude?
- D. What might be some of the benefits of regularly spending time alone with God?
- E. Of all the activities connected to solitude, which ones do you find most appealing? Which ones are more difficult? Why might this be the case?