

Aware
Practicing the Presence
August 14, 2011

Those dramas they are so unrealistic (wink wink). We'll come back to that in a few minutes.

Well, as Kitti said, today we are concluding our summer series, called *Aware*. We have spent the last several weeks looking at becoming aware of the presence of God in our lives.

We have looked at what it means to have eyes to see where God is working on us, in us, for us and through us.

We learned about how to hear God through the Bible, through the promptings of the Holy Spirit and through the wisdom God has already provided to us.

I have learned and been reminded of a lot in this series and I hope you have too.

I want to encourage you that if you have missed a message this summer, take some time to listen on-line or stop by the Well to pick up a CD.

Well today's topic is "Practicing the Presence". So I thought it might be good to start off explaining what is meant by this phrase and what is not. Now I have permission from my husband to tell this story.

When Price was in college he was attending a retreat and attended a session about learning to practice the presence of God. At the end of the session the speaker gave everyone the opportunity to meditate and have an opportunity to practice the presence of God. Soon the end of the session came and Price realized that he had missed the whole thing... he had dozed off. Later he overheard some friends talking about someone loudly snoring in the room during the session and he realized that the person they were talking about snoring was him. So needless to say "practicing the presence" has come to mean something a little different in our home.

Though John Ortberg does share in his book, "The Life You've Always Wanted" that sometimes the most spiritual thing we can do is take a nap (hard to be like Jesus when you are sleep-deprived), for the purpose of our time together today, when I'm talking about practicing the presence of God I'm referring to that state when we are awake and in step with God and aware of His presence in our lives and in our world.

Remember this scripture Rick shared with us at week one of this series, one we heard a lot.

But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. Matthew 13:16 (NIV)

That describes someone who is practicing the presence of God. They are able to see and to hear the things of God.

I love this quote from Brother Lawrence, a 17th Century monk whose wisdom on the subject is found in a short book called, "The Practice of the Presence of God".

He says, "I walk before God simply, in faith, with humility and with love; and I apply myself diligently to do nothing and think nothing which may displease Him."

Reading this quote and several others like it, makes me think that Brother Lawrence really got the meaning of John 15 verse 5,

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

I think Brother Lawrence understood how incredibly important it was to practice again and again remaining in the presence of the Lord in all things. Remembering that Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. So what happens if we don't remain in Christ? What if we stop practicing the presence of the Lord?

Right before that verse in Matthew about being blessed because we have eyes to see and ears to hear, we read this:

*For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes.
Matthew 13:15(NIV)*

As I read these scriptures I am reminded that it is not a "given" that I am always in a place to have eyes to see and ears to hear. Sometimes I become the person whose heart is calloused and begin to find it difficult to hear and see where God is at work.

I have been thinking a lot about this. What causes me to have a callous heart?

Not remaining in God.

What keeps me being aware of and experiencing God's presence and activity in my life?

Cutting myself off from the vine. Forgetting that apart from Christ, I can do nothing which certainly includes seeing and hearing God.

So if not remaining in Christ and practicing being in His presence creates in me a calloused heart, one that is not so interested in where God is at work. Why don't I remain in Him?

Although I'm certain we could create quite a long list, I wrote down four reasons that I struggle with practicing the presence of God and therefore cease to remain in Him.

The first was illustrated so well in the drama. Most of the time if I am not remaining in Christ, it's because I am hurry-sick. If you've taken Hearing God with Kitti or done the study "Ordinary Day with Jesus" then you are probably familiar with Hurry Sickness.

Hurry Sickness is what happens when I have little to no margin in my life.

My life is running at a pace that is so fast and urgent that it is effectively killing the work of God in me. I'm running from appointment to appointment, I've booked my calendar solid with meetings, activities and things I feel I simply MUST do. I have said yes and yes and yes and yes so much that I have said NO to having any time in God's presence. The noise of my life is so great that I simply can not hear God's voice and the chaos

keeps me from seeing where He is at work.

How do you know if you have hurry sickness? Listen to a few of these statements and see how you respond.

You go through your days with a constant sense of urgency.

You notice underlying tension in close relationships.

You have a preoccupation with escaping.

You have lost a sense of gratitude and wonder about life.

You find that you're often trying to do too many things at once.

If those statements are true in your life, you probably have hurry sickness.

When I'm hurry-sick, people become objects and interruptions. I find myself saying in my head and out loud, hurry up, I'm late, how nice of you to get in my lane of traffic going 10 miles under the speed limit, by all means please take your cart full of groceries into the express lane. Don't mind that I have just this one thing to buy and I'm late for a meeting and you clearly have 30 items not 10.

Hurry sickness is a common way that the presence of God gets sucked right out of my life and yours.

A second reason that I don't remain in Christ and therefore become calloused is an overindulgence on the world.

An overindulgence on the world is when I spend my downtime filling up the space in my life with less than filling activities.

I tell myself that I am too tired or busy to have time for God and then spend 3 hours in the middle of the night mindlessly scrolling through wedding photos of someone I don't know on Facebook. I mean I started looking at a newsfeed from my cousin of a photo she was tagged in and next thing I know I'm looking at 550 photos of some stranger's wedding. It's like I just get sucked in.

Sometimes it's email, or Netflix. I think, "Well my brain needs a little vacation so I'll just sit down and watch an episode of this entertaining show." Next thing I know I've been sucked in to watching back-to-back episodes of Lost til 1 in the morning.

Now of course, there isn't anything inherently "wrong" with watching a little TV or catching up with family on the old Facebook but I have to wonder sometimes if I have snacked on the world so much that I am too full to take in the things of God.

What about you? Have you filled up your tank on junk or are you filling up on the good stuff God is offering?

Well if hurry sickness and overindulgence on the world aren't keeping me from seeking God than another place I look is to see what idols I might be worshipping.

Idol worship is placing anything or person in a place that is to be reserved only for God.

So I have to ask myself what things or people am I putting in God's place? Am I giving someone or something the place that only God deserves in my

life?

For me, it is almost always another person or group of people. If you've been around NHCC a while and heard me teach, you know I struggle with people pleasing. I have to constantly battle not allowing the opinions of others to take the place of God's opinion in my life.

If I'm not careful, I look around and find myself working for the approval of the people in my life instead of looking to God for my worth. When others become the central focus of my life, I lose perspective on what God may be trying to say in my life. I want them to be happy. I want them to give me the gold seal of approval. I have to look and see if I am giving up time with God or silencing His voice for the sake of an idol in my life. What about you?

Finally if it isn't hurry sickness, overindulgence on the world or idol worship keeping me from remaining in Christ, then it is most likely guilt and shame.

Sometimes I avoid seeking God's presence because I have sinned. I have sinned and I am struggling to believe that God's grace truly is enough to cover my sin. I believe it's true for others but my sin feels so huge that I can't believe that God won't make me pay for it in some way and so I avoid approaching Him or spending time with Him.

Other times, I know I have sinned and I don't want to face God because I know He will convict me to repent. I think if I just don't approach Him maybe He'll let me just slide by on this one. Unfortunately this happens a lot with my health. I try to downplay my poor eating. I try to pretend that God doesn't care that I am a glutton. That he doesn't mind if I eat all six of

these candy bars in one sitting and that somehow it is actually good for me to do so because then they won't be sitting around tempting me. I know if I go to God, He is going to convict me that I can't have free reign at the dessert station of life. That He will call me to lay down this sin and to trust Him once again to redeem me and my life. Apart from Him, I can do nothing.

So there you have it. Four reasons I avoid spending time in God's presence and therefore become calloused. The more I avoid God, the more I give up meeting with Him, the more I give up seeking Him, the more I stop pursuing Him, the more distant He feels. I am the one moving away, drifting off, and the more calloused my heart becomes.

The more I cut off from God the more I become like my "old self" which is marked by approval addiction and workaholism, being short-tempered and overly critical of others, undisciplined in many areas of my life, prone to wander away from Him and to give in to the sinful tendencies of my life.

Again you could probably come up with your own list but as for me, I have to be on the look out for hurry sickness, overindulgence on the world, idol worship, and guilt and shame.

So now that we have looked at what can get in the way of remaining in Christ and therefore keeping our ears open to hear and our eyes open to see where God is at work, let's talk about what it would mean to repent of pulling away from God. What would it look like to remain in Him?

Well I think a lot of times, we get it in our head that if we just have a morning quiet time, or go to church, or do a Bible Study, or work hard at

serving and volunteering, we will automatically remain in God. It's kind of a tricky thing.

See, religious activity doesn't automatically guarantee that we will remain in Christ. Jesus was pretty clear that the Pharisees (the most religious of His day) were calloused and far from where they needed to be.

Many of us have heard this scripture speaking of them and their hearts.

These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Mark 7:6

You can be someone who quotes every scripture in the Bible, you can serve on five ministry teams, you can be the most diligent at having a one-hour daily devotion time and lead the Bible Study for your friends and still be far from God. It's like I tell my kids, it's your motive that counts. Am I spending time with religious activities in order to be righteous? Or am I spending time with God and His people in an effort to grow more in love with Him and with others?

I come back to that quote from Brother Lawrence.

Remember he said, "I walk before God simply, in faith, *with humility and with love*; and I *apply myself diligently* to do nothing and think nothing which may displease Him."

In looking at this quote and contemplating John 15: 5

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

I'm mindful that there are two aspects of practicing the presence of God that I must keep in mind. The first is an attitude, an attitude that is humble, teachable and open to God. An attitude that says I'm willing to lay my heart open before God and allow Him to do surgery on the parts of my heart that have become callous and hard. The second is the choice to diligently apply myself. I must choose to remain or I will effectively cut off the lifeline from my heart. My heart will shrivel up, grow cold and calloused without the intentional meeting with God.

We must practice again and again to be in His presence. Our own sinful nature, the world, and the enemy of our souls will pull us away from remaining in Him. See it's not a once-and-done deal. It's not a just-spend-five-minutes-in-the-morning-and-then-get-it-over-with thing. This is why it's so imperative to have some gauges that we use to check our hearts.

Remember Proverbs:

Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it. Proverbs 4:23

Our hearts indicate where we are. So I have these checks that I have become aware of. When I find myself rolling my eyes a lot, making growling sounds, snapping at my kids to hurry up, annoyed by sounds like phones ringing, emails dinging, and people around me become obstacles to what I'm trying to get done, that is a great sign that my heart is on empty. I have allowed myself to be cut off from the vine, Jesus. And the more depleted I am, the more time I need to replenish. If I'm in a good and healthy place, my time with God looks much different than if I am totally depleted.

When I first came to work at NHCC over 11 years ago (after leaving my career in higher ed to become the Director of Administration), I was a mess and didn't even know it. My life ran at such a pace that it was nearly impossible to spend time with God. He would need to speed up so I could hear him while I was multi-tasking. I did not make time or space to allow God to speak into my life. I had no idea I was not remaining in Him. I was confused as to why so many others experienced the fruits of the spirit in their lives but my life felt chaotic and messy. I was always striving and straining.

Then one day when I'm certain my messiness was particularly messy, two of the pastors suggested that I take the book "The Life You've Always Wanted" by John Ortberg and attempt to do the retreat in the back of the book. They suggested I take nothing but a notebook, a Bible and a pen to a nearby park and spend one hour in SOLITUDE and SILENCE. To survive one hour in that environment would be a miracle for me at that time.

And in that time, after the first 20 minutes of complete uncomfortableness, God met me. He began to speak to me. He showed me how I was striving and that it didn't have to be that way.

He showed me, Matthew 11:28-30

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. (NIV)

That day began a new journey for me as a follower of Christ. Years before,

I had accepted Christ as my Savior but now I was learning what it meant to have Him as my Lord. I was learning what my life could be like if I would remain in Him. How He would give me amazing experiences of His joy, His peace, His presence. How I would look back and see how He had transformed me. How I was becoming more like Him, a little bit more each day I choose to remain in Him.

He has shown me that to remain in Him I need to be certain that I create space for us to spend time together alone on a regular and consistent basis where He can work on my heart. For me, when I give up a weekly Sabbath with an extended time for journaling, self examination and scripture it's only a matter of time before I fry my circuits. In addition, at least once a year I call a two-day time out on the world and I go away for a personal retreat to look at where I've been over the last year. What has God done and what does he still want to do?

Then there are those daily doses... Time to read my Bible or a Christian inspired book, maybe listen to a podcast. Time with His church so I can be challenged to grow through the teaching of His word, the encouragement of His people and through serving others the way He has served me. I do these things all with an openness to God, allowing Him to work on me, in me, through me and for me. Keeping my ears open to His word, the Holy Spirit and wisdom.

When my heart is full of God's presence, I have ears to hear and eyes to see.

I see people as people and I grow in my ability to obey His commands.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. 'The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." Mark 12:30-31 (NIV)

In the time that we have remaining, I want to create some space for you to maybe experience what I did that day in the park.

That day in the park, I sat still and I asked God to speak to me. I opened my heart for him to show me where I needed some surgery to remove the callous spots. I confessed where I was not trusting Him or living in the way He had called me to. I thanked Him for loving me so much more than I deserved or could imagine. And I ended my time asking God to sum up what He was asking me to do, what was it that I needed to do or change to keep my heart soft and open and be able to see and hear Him working in my life.

So we are going to have five minutes of directed stillness. Under your seats, we have placed a booklet. Let's take some time to open our hearts up for God to examine. Let Him speak to you about what is really going on inside of your heart. During this time, the band will play some instrumental music and then they will begin to sing as we come out of this time of stillness. During this time, I want to encourage you to engage and to open your heart. If you aren't ready, then just sit and rest and listen to the music.

Let's pray.

Jesus, I pray in these next minutes that you will create space where we can hear from you. Open our hearts to experience your love, your

grace, your mercy, and your truth. Help us to connect with you that we might remain in you. Being reminded that apart from you we can do nothing on our own. We can't get peace, we can't find fulfillment. You are our life. Help us to enter into your presence today. Draw near to us Lord as we seek to draw near to you. Amen

Lord, we want to stand surrendered to you. You are constantly speaking and acting. Help us to put ourselves in places to see you at work and to hear your promptings. Help us Lord to find and desire space and time to fill up on your presence. Seal this time up in our hearts. Amen.

I want to encourage you to take some time this week to try this again. For some of you, maybe you need to take a vacation day and find a place to hide away with God. Whatever it is, find that space to be in God's presence and come to him with an open, humble and teachable attitude ready to have surgery on the calloused parts of your heart so that you might gain ears to hear and eyes to see.

Next weekend, we begin our 5 week series, "Detox II: Living With Our Losses." I could easily have added grief to one of the things that saps us and pulls us away from God.

You will not want to miss this series. It will be a time to heal as we learn to grieve and this series is a perfect time to invite friends who don't have a church home because all of us have had our losses and learning to grieve and heal is so critical. We look forward to seeing you next week.