

SERIES: SPIRITUAL FORMATION: HABITS OF A HEALTHY HEART

Part 4: Solitude

Hey everyone! Thanks for the opportunity to talk to you a little bit over the next few weeks about some habits, some disciplines that help us guard our hearts, habits that help us embody our identity in Christ, and how if we are going to be spiritually healthy, we have to instill some of these habits into our lives.

So, our baseline to this series – the verse that we are basing this series on is Proverbs 4:23 – “*Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life.*” In week 1, Brandon talked about how a gospel focus helps us determine our habits and our disciplines. In week two, we talked about how sin makes it difficult to maintain a healthy heart. Last week, Brandon told us that our spiritual practices or our spiritual habits come out of who we are in Christ. This is a really important thing to understand. What we do flows out of who we are. When we reverse this, we get into some serious trouble. The simple truth is that the commitments we make come from who we are.

If you were here last week, Brandon challenged us at the end of the message with a series of questions asking us about what we value. If you weren't here last week, I want to challenge you to go back and listen to the sermon. The question that Brandon asked that I've been wrestling with this week as I put together this message was this: “*What do I value most?*” Because we spend time on what we value. Some of you may not like to hear me say this, but our calendars and reminders are reflections of what we value. As I was wrestling with that question this week, another one came to my mind: If someone followed me around for week, would they be able to tell that I value my relationship with Christ, just based on my priorities? I think that's a good question we need to ask ourselves.

A minute ago, I said that the commitments we make come from who we are. There's a second piece of our commitments though: our commitments are also formative. They shape us into who we are becoming. The habits and practices we commit to shape us into who we become.

Last week, Brandon used the example of his wedding ring and his marriage to describe this. If he only checked in on Krista once a week or on her birthday and only checked in on her because he felt like he had to – that’s not much of a relationship.

In the same way, we have a Father who loves us and cares for us and wants to be with us and spend time with us. If and when we spend time with Him not only comes from who we are, but it also is formative. The more we spend time with God, the more we get to know Him and his ways, the more we love Him and the more we are shaped by His character. Our lives matter, I get that we have many responsibilities and obligations that we have to meet – so we don’t want to turn this discussion about spiritual habits into another obligation. If we do that, then we’ve completely missed the point.

Our relationship with God was meant to be more than just transactional. The big churchy word for this is *sanctification*. When Jesus died for us, he didn’t just say, “Ok, well, I paid your sin debt, so I’ll see you around.” No – we were formed for God’s family. Jesus paid our debt so that we could be adopted as sons and daughters – and that means God is our father. So, today we are talking about one of the ways we can connect with God – a spiritual habit we can commit to to grow our relationship with God: spending time with God in solitude.

How many of you like to cook? A few of you. One of the things that Meriah and I have started doing recently is cooking together on the weekends so that we are prepared for the week – that way we have food available for us when things get busy. I’m not Gordon Ramsey or anything, but I’m getting pretty decent at cooking, and I’m finding it to be a little bit fun. Now, let’s say that after church today you come over my house, and I cook for you – whatever your favorite food is – and it’s the best you’ve ever had. And while you’re there you eat seconds, and thirds, you’re just so full because it tastes so good, and you go home full. And you decide that the only time you’re going to eat is Sunday afternoon because the food I cook for you is just so good. But Monday evening rolls around and you’re starting to get hungry...and by Thursday morning, you’re just famished; you’re running on empty. And you’re saying, “I just can’t wait until Sunday afternoon so I can eat again.”

No one can live that way, and the solution would be to learn the habit of cooking so that you can feed yourself. A lot of times, we treat our spiritual lives like this. We come in here on Sunday mornings because we are spiritually famished because we think that this is the only time we can cultivate our relationship with God – when all we have to do is learn to develop a habit of being with him and spending time with him.

Luke 5:16 (NIV) tells us that, “*Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.*” In the same way that Jesus did, we need to develop this habit of solitude – of getting alone with God.

If you are an introvert, if you’d consider yourself an introvert raise your hand. Okay, so the introverts are just barely raising their hands. Who are the extroverts in here? I know, you’re practically jumping out of your seat right now because you want to let us know. If we weren’t in church you’d be going crazy. The thing about introverts and extroverts is that it’s not that introverts are bad with people and introverts are good with people. It’s that introverts tend to be drained by people and extroverts tend to be energized by people. I tend to be introverted. It doesn’t mean I’m bad with people, it just means that if I’m going to go hang out with people or have a get together, I have to have it planned ahead so I can emotionally start to prepare for it. And when it’s done, I need some time to re-energize on my own. If you’re an extrovert, you probably get that energy from being around others.

So, when you hear that Jesus frequently practiced the habit of solitude, introverts are saying, “Awesome”, while the extroverts are already worrying about being alone and bored. We need to understand though, that not one discipline or spiritual habit we talk about in this series is more important than the other. Getting in the habit of practicing various spiritual disciplines is important to our overall spiritual health.

What I want to do is take a look at the picture Jesus painted for us in scripture about what seeking God through solitude looks like. The bible gives us this picture of Jesus who is consistently trying to get away to be alone with the Father. Jesus could have been doing a number of different things – healing the sick, preaching a sermon, casting out demons, whatever – but we see Jesus

trying to get away. If Jesus needed time to reconnect and refocus with God, then we need that too. So let's take a look together at some of the ways Jesus did this:

- *Matthew 14:23 -- And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone...*

Jesus had just heard the news of the death of John the Baptist, and then went on to feed the 5,000.

- *Mark 6:31 (NLT) -- Then Jesus said, "Let's go off by ourselves to a quiet place and rest awhile." He said this because there were so many people coming and going that Jesus and his apostles didn't even have time to eat.*

Jesus used solitude to rest after a long day's work.

- *Luke 4:42 -- "And when it was day, he departed and went into a desolate place."*

Jesus starts his day with the father.

- *Luke 6:12 -- "In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God."*

Jesus used solitude to seek the Father's will before choosing the 12 disciples.

There are many other times in the gospels we find Jesus seeking solitude to reconnect with the Father. And it wasn't just Jesus who did this:

- In Exodus 19-20, Moses is alone with God on Mt. Sinai in order to receive and study God's word – the 10 Commandments.
- Isaiah the prophet was sustained by God through solitude with Him (Isaiah 30:15)
- David tells us in Psalm 62 that in solitude, God removed his fears and gave him encouragement to continue on.
- Paul tells us in Galatians chapter 1 that he spent 3 years using solitude to discern whether God's call on his life was for ministry and to prepare himself for this calling.

So, if Jesus made time for solitude, in the midst of everything else good he could have been doing, and other people in the bible made it a priority, maybe God is trying to tell us something here. It's an important habit to get ourselves in – the habit of meeting with God, just getting one on one with Him as a regular practice.

Can I just say that it's ok for us to turn our phones off? I get that we feel like we have to be accessible all the time, but our phones have a power button, and it's not wrong to utilize that sometimes.

Now, I do want to clarify something here. In solitude, as a habit, we are getting alone with God, but there's a big difference between solitude and isolation. This is a big deal, especially as isolated as we felt during 2020. In solitude, we are hitting pause from our relationships, just taking a short break from them, and it could be a really short break – like 15 minutes. Solitude is running to God. Isolation is running away from our problems. We need to get this. Life is always going to have problems. Problems in life are unavoidable. But is our intent to meet with God in the midst of our problems and issues, or is it to escape from our problems? I think we need to be really honest with ourselves here.

If we are practicing the habit of solitude with the right motives, we understand that if we are going to have any success in life and with our problems and deal with life and all of its issues, we have to get with God. But it's not just about dealing with life and all our own issues and problems either. This is one of those upside down ways that God works, but practicing the habit of solitude regularly helps our relationships. As strange as it may sound, if you want to better the relationships you have with others, you want to make solitude with God a priority. Why? Because the people around you get the best version of you when you spend regular time alone with God. They get your scraps and your leftovers when you're always running on empty.

So, we have to make spending time with God a priority. Here's the bottom line: You can say anything is important to you, your family your job, God, whatever, but if you show me your calendar, I can tell you what's important to you.

Not only do we have to make solitude with God a priority, but we also have to take the time regularly. Notice that I didn't say make time. We have to *take* the

time. It doesn't matter how intelligent you are or how strong you are, you can't make the day have more than 24 hours. So, that might mean saying "no" to some things. That might mean some sacrifice.

Here's what I don't want to do: I don't want to turn this into a guilt trip where you feel like you have to commit four hours of your day to this. What if it's only 5 minutes a day? What if you start with that? What if you wake up 5 minutes earlier, or go to bed 5 minutes later? Or what if you turn off that podcast on your way in to work in the mornings and spend that time in your car in solitude with God? What would it look like for you to just focus on that word *regularly*?

I think, whether we've been around church for a while, or if we're new to church, I think we struggle with this concept of getting alone with God, with solitude, quiet time, because we struggle with the practical part of it. I think we get the importance of it, but we don't make it a regular habit because we don't know what to do during our time, and we feel like it has to be this formal thing. So, before we close this morning, I want to get really practical: what are some things to do in solitude with God?

- **Worship** through singing. Some of you in here, when you belt it out on Sunday mornings. You're making a joyful noise. I can hear you...and that's awesome. But some of us like to sing, but are kind of self-conscious about it. What if you could sing out to God, and you knew that it was only Him listening? That's something to do.
- **Prayer.** Prayer is another thing we can do in our time alone with God. We have spent a lot of time talking about types of prayers and practicing prayer together. There are lots of ways to pray. Some of us struggle with this one because we feel like there's this formality when we pray to the Lord that we have to follow. I used to feel so guilty when I would pray at night mid-prayer and then I'd wake up in the morning going, "I never hung up. I didn't say 'Amen'". The bottom line with prayer is that we're talking to God like he's our father, because he is. The Lord's Prayer – most of us know it – Jesus taught us to pray, "Our Father..." We don't have to talk to God in the King James Version of prayer. There's no beseeching. Did you have a good day? Go talk to the Father. Did you have a bad day? Go talk

to the Father. You're just hanging out having a conversation with your dad.

- **Study.** We can read and study God's word. You don't have to raise your hands on this, but how many of you have tried to read your bible with the TV on or with your cell phone on and next to you? It's difficult, isn't it? Every time we get a notification or a text or a call or something, it's a distraction. I'll say it again – it's ok to turn your cell phone off for a while.
- There are so many more, but the last one we'll talk about today is **journaling.** Sometimes prayer can become more real to us if we write it down. Maybe that's how you think – you've got to get your thoughts down on paper. One of the cool things about journaling is that you can look back at the way God has been faithful to you – maybe not in the exact ways that we expected, but it helps us praise Him all the more.

Brandon, Gary, and I -- our hope and prayer for you all as we continue through this journey of spiritual disciplines is that you would begin to put these things into practice in your life, and if you are already doing them, that you would stay the course. If there's any way we can help you, please let us know – whether that means talking with you more about what we talked about this morning, getting you a bible, or anything like that, we'll do whatever it takes to help you on this journey.

Let's pray.