

The Sacred Path (Part 1)

Introduction

The Text

³⁸ Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. ³⁹ And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." ⁴¹ But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, ⁴² but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:38–42)

With Mary's Heart to Martha's Work

- A. We saw last week that Jesus is calling Martha and us away from anxious serving into the sweet rest of relationship with Him—the one “*necessary*” (v. 42) thing.
- B. If I could clarify for a moment: The point Jesus is making here, I think, is not to say that work or serving like Martha has no place in the Christian life. It is to say that all the work and serving we do is to come from a place of resting in and receiving from Jesus.
 - 1. It's not that Martha is being pinned against Mary here, and we must choose one or the other. It's that we are to first sit and listen with Mary and then take that heart of restful reliance on Jesus and bring it into our working with Martha. We first pursue Mary's heart and then we pursue Martha's work.
- C. To put it simply: When we get alone with Jesus it transforms our activity for Jesus. Our being with Him transforms our doing for Him. It's not that we choose one or the other, it's that one is first, fundamental and everything else flows out of it.
 - 1. This text, in many ways, is just an illustration of what Jesus says to His disciples in [John 15](#): “*Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me*” (v. 4). The call here is to abide so that you will bear much fruit.

How Do We Do It?

- A. But now here's the question (and this is going to set up the next two weeks): If this abiding, or sitting and listening to Jesus like Mary here, is the first, the fundamental, the one necessary thing . . . do we know how to do it?
 - 1. Perhaps we came away from last week's sermon saying: “Yes and amen. We need this.” But then when we stop and think about it, we say: “Wait a minute. How do we actually do

it? Jesus isn't here in the flesh anymore. I can't sit at His feet and listen in the way Mary did. What does it mean for me to pursue this sort of thing now?"

- B. "You say, of course, of course. I know. We sit and listen at Jesus' feet now through things like reading the Bible and prayer—the 'daily devotion', the 'quiet time'." You might know the answer. This is the way we pursue the heart of Mary. But statistics here would say the majority of Christians still aren't doing it.
 - 1. Ed Stetzer, in his blog post [The Epidemic of Bible Illiteracy in Our Churches](#), refers to a recent LifeWay Research study where they found that only 45 percent of those who regularly attend church read the Bible more than once a week. And of those only about 1 in 5 read it every day. On the other side, about the same number (1 in 5) say they never read it.
 - a. So you have about 20% that read it every day, another 20% that don't read it at all, and the majority in the middle there with people who read it on occasion. And these are people in the church! These are people who we would assume are wanting to be disciples of Jesus.
- C. So if Jesus is saying in our text sitting at His feet and listening to His word is the one necessary thing, and we know now that we engage this largely through reading the Bible and prayer, why in the world are so many of us not doing this?
 - 1. At worst, it may be because we just don't care all that much. But, at best (and this is where I imagine many of us are) it may be because we just don't know how to do it.
 - a. The Bible is confusing. Times alone with Jesus can feel awkward. We get excited about the idea of it, but we get in to actually do it and we just wander about and wonder: "What am I doing? Should I sit quietly, pray, journal, sing, read some other book. What's the point of all this? What's supposed to happen here? What's this supposed to look like?"

The Sacred Path

- A. Well, this is the sort of stuff I'm going to attempt to address for us here this week and next. Really, much in response to my own personal struggles with the devotional life, I've put together what I call The Sacred Path.
 - 1. I told you last week, I often sit down to meet with Jesus and I end up going here and there and perhaps just drifting back to ministry work, or just venting my feelings, or staring at my naval, or whatever.
 - a. I felt like I needed something to help me keep focused. I wanted to try to keep myself moving forward on a path towards Jesus. So, looking at Scripture, and drawing inspiration from other godly Christians, I carved out these five steps that now compose this Sacred Path.
- B. To be clear, this is certainly not the only way to approach the matter. There have certainly been many good methods for devotions and things outlined by others. Perhaps you already have

something that is working well for you. By no means is this an attempt to change that. But maybe you might still find something here to help fill things out a bit, or something you can mix and match in your own way.

1. The bottom line is this: Jesus is saying to Martha and us: “You need to get with Mary, sitting and listening”—so we best make an attempt to do so. And I want to help if I can.
- C. I said there were five steps to this Path, and we’re going to look at the first three today: (1) Solitude; (2) Silence; and (3) Scripture. (On the back of your handout we’ll kind of fill out this worksheet I use as we go and eventually I’ll make it available online for you.)

(1) Solitude

Navigating the Extremes

- A. How do you feel about being alone? I imagine that it is somewhat different for each one of us.
1. Some probably like it quite a bit, perhaps even too much. We grow tired of other people quite quickly. We get out with other people and, in almost no time at all, we find ourselves longing to retreat back to our own space and zone.
 2. Others of us might actually have a serious disdain for solitude. We don’t like it. We do everything we can to avoid it. If we can’t be around other people, well we’ll at least turn on the TV, or the radio, or troll Facebook for hours. We’d rather be anything but alone.
- B. There are many reasons for these sorts of preferences:
1. On the one hand, we might prefer solitude to company because when we are with others we find that we are too self-conscious. We are always worrying about what we should say next or how it will be received. We are, quite frankly, scared of other people—their opinions, their rejection—and we’re ashamed of ourselves—we feel we must clean ourselves up, put the mask on, play the game. It’s an exhausting thing and so we can’t bear it for long. We prefer the safety and comfort of solitude.
 2. On the other hand, we might prefer company to solitude because when we are with others we are distracted from the sorts of things we fear we might have to face if we ever get alone. Sometimes it is easier to always have someone nearby, to always be in the buzz of conversation or activity, because our minds are occupied somewhere else. When we get alone, our hearts start to come out, our feelings start to rear up, our wounds start to ache, we become more aware of things broken inside, and we don’t want to face it.
- C. In either of these extremes, we miss the idea of Solitude as it is presented in the Bible, as I am calling us to consider it here this morning.
1. On the one hand, Solitude that the Bible calls us to is not merely an escape from other people, it is a pursuit of God. And, on the other hand, we find that, while Solitude does

provide opportunity for our internal world to be exposed, it is not intended to be some scary thing. God meets us in that secret place and brings healing.

Making a Case

- A. Before I go any further on this, I should make the case for Solitude's importance from Scripture. For this, while we could go to countless places, it seems we really needn't go any further than just to take a quick survey of our Lord's own life. Solitude with God was built into the very rhythms of His day to day.
1. [Luke 4:42](#): "And when it was day, he departed and went into a desolate place [‘and there he prayed’—[Mark 1:35](#)]. And the people sought him and came to him, and would have kept him from leaving them." He's already done all these miracles, people want Him near, He could keep going and going, but He steps away—Solitude with His Father—to gain clarity on what He's supposed to do next.
 2. We read of the same sort of thing in [Luke 5:15-16](#): " ¹⁵ But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities. ¹⁶ But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray."
 3. After Jesus fed the 5000 we read that He "dismissed the crowds, [and] . . . went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone" ([Matt 14:23](#)).
- B. And then, in [Mark 6:31](#), we see that this Solitude with God is not something merely for Jesus as the Son. It is for all of us. He tries to instill this rhythm into His disciples. After they'd been sent out and done much ministry in the surrounding towns, Jesus says to them: "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while."

The Practical Side

- A. So, I think this Sacred Path towards Jesus begins with this idea of Solitude, of getting alone with God—whether that means you rise up early before your kids or roommates, or you sit in your car in some offbeat location before coming into work, or you literally head into the hills.
- B. There is, of course, a very practical side to this.
1. For one thing, Solitude creates space for you to engage Jesus with minimal distraction.
 2. And, second, we also understand that Solitude creates space for you to engage Jesus with minimal reservation.
 - a. What I mean here is that our times with the Lord are meant to be messy affairs. We read about Jesus' time with God: "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence" ([Heb 5:7](#)). Whether this is only referring to Gethsemane, I am not sure. Either way, when we consider the Psalms—how they speak to God, cry, shout, etc.—we are not supposed to think this is a nice,

clean, civilized thing that you can always do in a coffee shop or a neighborhood bookstore. Can you meet with God there? Sure.

- i. But the basic idea, it seems to me, is that you really need to pour out your heart. You are going to cry and get snot-nosed and lift your voice, you are going to sing, shout, bless Him, and even yell at Him at times. You need to make space to engage for real as a child with a Father.
3. The last thing I will say, and this is probably obvious, but, depending on your stage in life, getting alone with God might require more creativity or work for you than it does for others. Families with young children might find that a full rearrangement of the schedule is necessary in order to move towards this. But I hope you see how it is well worth the effort. Please do give yourself grace as you try. God can and does meet us in the midst of the crazy as well.

(2) Silence

Detox and the Devil

- A. As with Solitude, Silence, I do believe, elicits a spectrum of responses. But, by and large, it seems to me, our culture has a kind of allergic reaction to the idea. We are addicted to noise, and when we finally turn off the devices, pull out the earbuds, retreat into quiet, it can feel almost like a sort of detox—the type where your body shakes and rejects the notion with surprising violence.
 1. The famous missionary martyr, Jim Eliot wrote: “I think the devil has made it his business to monopolize on three elements: noise, hurry, crowds. . . . Satan is quite aware of the power of silence” (as quoted by Whitney in *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, p. 239).
 - a. There’s a power here. We might not know it. But the devil knows it. So as we try to move our souls towards this quiet place with God, it is no wonder it feels as if we are doing war with Satan himself. The devil knows, if we could ever get quiet, we would finally be in position to hear the voice of God!

Making a Case

- A. The first thing I feel I must show you here is that this is, in fact, a good, even a biblical, idea.
 1. On this, perhaps the place to start is by pointing out that Mary back in our text is, in fact, doing just this. She is not chattering or chattering back and forth with Jesus. No. We are told, rather, that she “[sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching](#)” (v. 39).
 - a. A closed mouth and an open ear. That is what she brings first to Jesus. And that is really what I am referring to here.
- B. But, of course, the Bible in countless other places make the case for Silence as an essential part of our engagement with God.

1. We might think of what God spoke through Moses to Israel as they stood trembling on the edge of the Red Sea, with the Egyptian army closing in behind them and the untamed wilderness on either side: “¹³ Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. ¹⁴ The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent” (Ex 14:13–14).
 - a. “O Israel, stop the fearing and the fretting, and be quiet. In the silence you are reminding your soul that I am God—that the battle belongs, not to you, but to Me.”
 2. Or we might think of what God spoke much later in Israel’s history. When the Assyrians were swelling with power, and they were facing the threat of exile from their land, God says this through Isaiah: “In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength” (Isa 30:15).
 - a. In the very moments where you feel you must pick up a sword and fight or make alliances with this or that nation to help, He’s saying again: “Stop all of that. Come back to Me and be quiet. That is what will change the course of all this for you.”
- C. All of this gets at the fact that our constant talking, whether to God or others, is often a result of our own anxiety and this feeling that we must come up with the solution. But God calls us to silence. And our move towards silence is really a move back towards sanity. Silence before God is a return to our place in the universe. It’s saying without words: “You are God, and I am not.”
1. This is the sort of thing the author of Ecclesiastes is writing about in Ecc 5:1-3: “¹ Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil. ² Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few. ³ For a dream comes with much business, and a fool’s voice with many words.” (cf. Hab 2:20)
- D. Putting Silence here near the beginning of this Sacred Path is an attempt to let settle in our hearts the idea that it is God—His agenda, His will, His word—that is ultimate in this whole exchange.
1. Do we have a lot to say? Undoubtedly. There is often much that we wish to speak, or vent, or scream. And, do not misunderstand me, surely we see that God invites us to come into His presence and do so.
 - a. But I find, as a general rule, it is wise to approach God first from the place of silence. “You speak to me!” His speaking brings order to the chaos. Ours tends only to add to it. If we hear Him first, we will speak to Him much differently later.

The Practical Side

- A. So we get alone with God, and then we get quiet before Him. But what does this Silence actually involve?
- B. Zach Eswine, in his wonderful book *The Imperfect Pastor*, gives a description of what this “silence” might look like. I have found it very helpful as I’ve tried to incorporate this into my own times with

the Lord: “I try to wait with no words for a moment in the presence of him who loves me and sees me in secret. But over the first several minutes my mind isn’t silent. The thoughts and feelings that have gone unnoticed amid the chatter of the day seize their moment and rise loudly to the surface as I try to quiet down. The first round of these thoughts is like foam on a soda or cream on milk. We clear it away to get to what lies beneath. So, I take each thought that vies for my attention, no matter what it is, how silly or terrible, how ordinary or task oriented, how biblically inaccurate or theologically sound, and turn it into a prayer, saying of each one, ‘I hear myself thinking this thing, Lord, and I bring it to you. I leave it with you.’

By taking each thought to him, I am doing what Peter told me to, ‘casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you’ (1 Pet 5:7). Casting our cares is like reaching into a pile of mixed laundry, sorting out each cloth, and putting each piece back where it belongs. Or going through a worn garage of tools scattered everywhere. One by one I pick up each tool and hand it to God, and he puts it back where it belongs. . . .

Now the first blast of frothy thought has been cleared. It matters to know that often after the froth clearing and before the deep drinking in prayerful aloneness with God, boredom, restless mind, feelings of wasted time, and anxious fear all collaborate into a gang and try to loot us. They mosquito-bite us, and we want to get up . . . and do anything but this.

Instead, I invite you to hold on Let’s face . . . this detox deliberately. With Jesus’ kindness and mercy set before us, we look again to the open book . . . ; we let in the wise man’s [Jesus’] mentoring” (pp. 160-161).

C. If I could elaborate a bit more on this for us, here’s what I think is happening in the Silence:

(1) We Recognize that We Are Always Talking

A. The first thing is to become aware of the fact that we are always talking. You say, “I’m an introvert, I loathe the idea of talking.” Externally, perhaps. But internally, I would wager that you are always going. Words are swirling about.

1. Too often it seems that our thoughts have us rather than we have our thoughts, if you know what I mean. We don’t even realize what is happening in here until we slow down and try to be quiet.

(2) We Tune in to What We Are Actually Saying

A. Then we must tune in to what in fact we are saying. At first, you might just notice little tasks or to-dos meandering about in your consciousness. They may or may not seem all that significant, but you give them to Him.

1. But some of these thoughts that move through, you might find, seem harmless at first, but they are attached to something much deeper and more significant for you.
 - a. If thoughts keep flitting towards a particular thing, we must wonder if somehow the center of gravity in our hearts has somehow shifted towards it. Like planets pulled into orbit around the sun, often our thoughts revolve around those things that are central, perhaps too central too us. If we have no time for thoughts of God because we are too busy thinking of this or that thing, well then I think we have identified an area where we’ll need His mending.

- B. Let me give you an example of this. Perhaps you find that you keep worrying about work. Tasks, projects, this or that. It might seem harmless at first, but you find that your mind keeps orbiting these things. You try to give them to God and move on, but then you are soon pulled back to them.
 - 1. As you continue to sit in that place with the Lord, you find that, beneath these flitting thoughts, there are deeper anxieties. One of your friends got fired last week for poor performance and you heard they might be looking to make more cuts.
 - a. It's not just these tasks or projects that you're thinking about. It's so much more. You're scared—for your job, your finances, your family, your sense of success and identity. All of this sprawls out like a tangled root system beneath these seemingly harmless passing thoughts.
- C. Part of the point in these times of Silence is to become more aware not just of God, but of the things you are thinking and feeling. As we become more aware of these things, we can more honestly surrender ourselves to Him and open ourselves up in the places we need Him to speak most.

(3) We Cast Our Cares, Surrender Our Wills, and Open Our Hearts

- A. And this really leads us to the essential components of this Silence. We cast our cares, we surrender our wills, we open our hearts . . . to Him. In the Silence, we position ourselves for real Christianity, for an encounter with Jesus. We prepare ourselves to hear from Him.

(3) Scripture

A Low Whisper

- A. Realistically, you may give only a few minutes to these things in the morning. But however long you sit in the Silence alone with God, the point is to ready yourself to hear from Him in Scripture.
- B. Perhaps a text that might bring all of this together for us this morning is found in [1 Kings 19:11-13a](#). Elijah is on the run from Ahab and Jezebel, and God meets him in the place of Solitude and teaches him that, in the Silence, He often speaks loudest.
 - 1. Elijah's taken up residence in a cave, and God calls to Him and says: " ¹¹ 'Go out and stand on the mount before the Lord.' And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. ¹² And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper. ^{13a} And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave."
- C. We have this tendency of thinking that all the greatest things of God are found in the hustle and the noise and activity—in the Martha sort of contexts.

1. But one of the things God is saying to Elijah here is that His word often comes where we least expect it: in the quiet. Indeed, even the Hebrew for “a low whisper” (v. 12) here literally translates: “a sheer silence” (NRSV). Or as the footnote in the ESV puts it: “a thin silence”. And, in the midst of this quiet, He hears the very words of God, so He wraps His face in his cloak.

D. Solitude, Silence, Scripture.

Because of the Cross!

- A. But there is one last thing we should say about this text here in 1 Kings, and it is with this that I will leave us this morning. Indeed, the cross of Calvary breaks into our reflection at this point and we are reminded of why we are permitted, even invited, to enjoy all of these things with God in the first place.
- B. I wonder if you noticed, God tells Elijah in v. 11: “Go out and stand on the mount before the Lord.” We’re not told exactly whether Elijah does this or not, but it would seem by my reading that he does not. For it is only later, after all of this wind and earthquake and fire, that we are told: “[H]e wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave” (v. 13a).
- C. So the picture is that God calls him to come out but before he can even move on that, the wind, earthquake, and fire begin. Meanwhile, Elijah remains in the cave sheltered by the rock as the wind, we’re told, “tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord” (v. 11). And then the earth quakes and fire burns.
 1. All three of these elements—wind, earthquake, and fire—are emblems of judgment, God’s holy fury against man’s sin. Countless texts would lead us to think so.
 - a. So there is more here than just God is found in the silence. Indeed, there is a most wonderful picture of how we are brought to actually hear God’s word in the first place.
- D. We are sinners. The judgment, the fury, the wrath should be for us, but instead we can get alone with God, and in the silence, hear His gracious, gentle, soothing voice. How?
 1. We have been sheltered by the Rock have not? There is Another who took the wind, took the earthquake, took the fire. You do remember don’t you that while Jesus was on the cross these are the sorts of things that took place, even literally?! We are told the earth quaked and the sun went black. The fury of God against sin was taken out against Him. He was not sheltered, He was not hidden, He did not hear His Father’s voice.
 - a. He was utterly abandoned and exposed and railed against . . . all so that what Elijah experienced here in Solitude and Silence could be our experience as well . . . so that God could come, not in wrath, but in love . . . and speak to us.
- E. The Son gave His life that we might have this privilege, He is here to mentor and apprentice us towards it, it is the key to the fruitful, Spirit-filled Christian life . . . so let’s give ourselves to it!