

One of the primary reasons we are walking through the Gospel of Mark at such a slow pace is because we deeply believe the fundamental task of apprentices to Jesus is to be attentive to God and be attentive to Jesus. And the best manner in which we grow in our attentiveness to Jesus is by spending time with him in the scriptures.

So our goal for this series is relatively simple. It is to observe, watch, follow, study, saturate, and baptize ourselves into the life of Jesus. We are taking note of his ministry, work, spiritual formation, and spiritual practices while continually taking note of the life that Jesus espoused to see what we can learn about how to live into the Kingdom of God that Jesus declared was present to us here and now

I want to start under the simple premise that what we do on a regular basis, we become. This is what it means to be human, to be in process and constantly shaped by the very habits, practices, and regular routines of our days. In some respects, we are the culmination of a thousand daily decisions we make that give way to the person we are becoming.

Our habits are not just things that we perpetually do, but rather, these things we do, do something to us. They slowly, over time, shape our loves and longings, and in turn, those loves and longings shape the very core of our lives.

We become what we do on a regular basis. If we want to be a world-class musician, then we would have a daily routine of practicing scales for hours at a piano. If we want to become a marathon runner, we would have a daily routine of healthy eating, running, and cross-training

While this applies to skill-sets we desire to develop; this is also true of our character and who we want to become. If we want to be less self-centered, we would have a daily routine of interacting with others and not living in isolation, fulfilling our every desire.

We should not divorce this logic of we become what we regularly do from what it means to follow Jesus because it is not a mere anomaly. Rather it is the manner in which God has chosen to infuse creation. Therefore, if we want to become Christlike, we would have a daily routine much like the routines of Jesus. If we desire to grow spiritually, we should assume the routines and rhythms that constituted Jesus' life.

Even Jesus needed the spiritual practices to lead the kind of life that Jesus led. So it would be essential for us to consider the manner in which our life is shaped. As I've heard one author state, "If we want the life of Jesus, we must embrace the lifestyle of Jesus." Because here is the bottom line: Our participation in the Kingdom of God is powered by a different set of practices than the world.

To live into the Kingdom of God is to detach from the patterns of this world and embrace a new pattern of living that brings about the life of

the Kingdom of God. Because of this, we orient our lives around a different set of practices; those that we witness in the very life of Jesus! It is a fundamentally different logic than the world.

The question naturally becomes, what are the practices that orient the Kingdom of God in Jesus' life? How did these give shape in the daily life of Jesus? What is a day in the life of Jesus like? How did Jesus navigate the complexities and demands of his own day?

We have a unique opportunity to look at "a day in the life of Jesus" because what Stephen preached last week, starting in verse 21 and going all the way to the sermon text next week, the end of chapter 1, is actually one full day in the life of Jesus. And not just that, but it is the first full recorded day of Jesus doing the kingdom work after announcing its arrival in him.

The Jewish conception of a day actually started in the evening and would go until the following evening, so, while we consider morning the start of our day, that would be mid-day for the Jewish mind. Thus, in verse 21, we see the day beginning in the evening, and when we get to our text in verse 35, "*very early in the morning,*" this is actually the middle of the day.

Let's look again at the narrative context of this particular moment. The day began back in verse 21, and Jesus was teaching in the synagogue; he was healing and driving out spirits, and he healed Simon's mother-in-law of an affliction. All the while, Mark makes notes that the crowds surrounding Jesus were amazed at his teaching and his authority. The crowds were continually swelling in size.

That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was. Mark 1:32-34

Now, put yourself in the scene. On Jesus' first day on the job as the King of the Kingdom of God, he is busy. He is teaching and healing, so much so that people are crowding around him to demand more work. This is the moment. Jesus must be exhausted, he must be tired from all the work he was doing, and not just that, the crowds, influence, and fame were becoming a problem.

Envision the scene; the entire town is waiting at the door. This is what we would think would be the moment of great influence—busy, exhausted, tired, and crowds following him.

Now, the scene that immediately follows our text in this message shows Jesus getting back to the work of healing people, specifically a leprous person, who we will hear about next week. But again, the crowds swell,

the excitement grows, and the notoriety and pressure continue to mount.

Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: “See that you don’t tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.” Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere. Mark 1:43-45

Again, notice the rising pressure and crowds. Jesus’ ministry seems to be peaking and it would have been an incredible opportunity for Jesus. A moment of astounding popularity and potential influence that was rising all around him.

Right in the middle of these two stories, we get a window into the spiritual practices of Jesus that enabled him to not give in to the demands of the world around him. It is a counter-logic move of the Kingdom of God. Remember, there are no chapter and verse numbers in the original writing. So the flow of this entire chapter is seemingly moving from one incredible story to the next.

Our text is sandwiched between these two moments. What are the practices that enabled Jesus not to lose focus of his purpose? What are the practices that enabled Jesus to become the kind of person he was? What were the practices of Jesus’ life that deeply formed him, even in the midst of pressure, fame, and influence? How did Jesus respond to success? How did Jesus respond to busyness and growing influence?

Let’s pick back up in our text in verse 35. *“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” (Mark 1:35).* So how does Jesus respond to the chaos of the moment? He withdraws. He retreats. What an interesting response. Here are a few interesting things about the response. Our natural reaction would be that following a really busy day at work, we would prescribe for Jesus to sleep in, take some additional rest and take it easy. But quite the opposite happens in the case of Jesus.

There are a few emphatic tones in this verse used by Mark. “Very early in the morning” is repeated in the phrase “while it was still dark.” And “left the house” is repeated in the phrase “went off.” Mark is drawing our attention to what is going on in this practice of Jesus.

Jesus probably got up early for a few reasons. The first was to avoid the crowds. They had been gathering and growing all the previous night. They had figured out where he lived and were pressing in on him to heal, etc. The other potential reason is simply to elaborate that Jesus didn’t indulge in leisure after a demanding day but found rest in something else, namely, solitude and prayer.

New Testament scholar Craig Keener notes that it would have been nearly impossible to find a place to be alone in the ancient towns. The streets were narrow, and many times there were over 20 people living in common one-room houses. Most town blocks consisted of four homes that would all face a commonly shared courtyard. Essentially the entire

extended family would be living in a single complex. The home was busy! Galilee itself was heavily populated, and villages were commonly close together. Therefore, in order for Jesus to get away, he would have to escape away to a “solitary place.”

Now the Greek word here for “solitary place” is an interesting word that pops up all over the place in the gospels because this was a regular practice of Jesus. But the word is *erémos*, meaning desolate, barren, lonely, and a solitary place.

The *erémos* is the lonely place or desolate place where Jesus will repeatedly retreat in order to connect with God and refresh. It was a part of Jesus’ regular rhythm of life and spiritual practice. As we work our way through the Gospel of Mark, pay attention to the manner in which Jesus oscillates between work and retreat—from engagement with the world to retreat away to recharge.

So the first thing Jesus does is retreat, but he doesn’t just retreat for the sake of rest; he retreats in order to pray and get some time with his Father. This was the central practice that seemed to tether Jesus to the work he had been given.

interesting to consider Jesus’ prayer life. We tend to think of prayer as a one-way directional conversation that is generally transactionally based. But if Jesus had a prayer life and he was fully God, it would immediately break down any conception of prayer as merely transactional. It is communion, connection, and intimacy with God

“Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: ‘Everyone is looking for you!’” (Mark 1:36-37). Again, we see here the rising and heightened pressure that Jesus is facing in his ministry. The work that Jesus had been doing through healing and casting out demons had stirred up crowds to pursue him and seek him out. The language here, “looking for you,” is more emphatic than it appears in English. It is more desiring, demanding, or a hunting down of his presence.

We see the alternative logic of the gospel at work again. The disciples interpret the demanding crowds as a desire for Jesus to continue doing all that he has been doing. But Jesus has other priorities; his primary mission is not to function as a miracle, wonder-worker but to preach the Kingdom of God.

Jesus replied, “Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.” So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons. Mark 1:38-39

What an interesting response from Jesus? In light of the growing crowds and demand, he decides to retreat away and escape the crowds. He defuses the energy. He maintains his focus on preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom of God to the neighboring villages. He is not beholden to anyone else’s mission or timetable. He is beholden only to God’s direction and purpose. Whatever Jesus does will not be oriented by the demands of the crowds but solely by the outworking of the Kingdom of God. In light of that commitment, he must continue to preach the arrival of the Kingdom of God.

Note that in the final verse in our text today, Mark notes that the preaching of the arrival of the Kingdom of God is accompanied by the healing power of driving out demons. The two are associated. The light is driving out the darkness. The conviction of Jesus and his commitment to his preaching is that those who hear of the arrival of the Kingdom as a realized reality will respond by repentance and living into the fullness of that availability.

Before moving along, it should be noted that Jesus will refuse and never succumb to the demands that people make on him. He will not acquiesce to the false claims and demands we would try to place on him. Jesus is fundamentally about the Kingdom of God, and the moment we try to manipulate Jesus for our purposes, we have created an alternative Jesus. And the fear may be that, as it was in this text, Jesus will depart from us. So, as we posed at the beginning, what do we learn from this day on the job for Jesus in the Kingdom of God?

What emerges are three simple practices that Jesus takes on that point toward the life of living into the Kingdom of God. Although this is not exhaustive, as we will see Jesus do more throughout the Gospel of Mark, these three practices give shape to the pattern of living that we can take up to imitate Christ and begin to participate in the Kingdom of God.

The three practices we see are the following: Practice of Solitude, Practice of Prayer, and Practice of Secrecy. I will walk through all three of these practices: solitude, prayer, and secrecy, and put some flesh on what these practices do and how they operate so we can integrate these into our own lives.

Solitude

The practice of solitude, although we may be unfamiliar with it, is rather simple. Adele Calhoun defines it as,

The practice of solitude involves scheduling enough uninterrupted time in a distraction-free environment that you experience isolation and are alone with God. Solitude is a “container discipline” for the practice of other spiritual disciplines.

By “container discipline,” she means it is one that enables the space and margin for other disciplines to be experienced. While this may be foreign to us, we are actually quite aware of its importance to connection and intimacy. Ultimately, it is what we all desire when we are first falling in love with a significant other. We desire solitude with the individual. We desire to be present with and alone with them, not solely for the sake of being alone, but for the purpose of developing intimacy through conversation, affection, and an exchange of joy.

In solitude, we escape to our own *erémos*, following in the pattern of Jesus as a way of intentionally detaching ourselves from the crowds to get further in touch with ourselves and with God.

This escape is not simply for refreshment; although that can happen, it is for the purpose of connecting with God and for the renewal of our minds away from all the attachments and distractions that can deter and shape our hearts in a particular direction away from God.

For most of us, the challenge in solitude will be finding both the time and the place. But whatever it looks like for us, we close ourselves away; we go to the beach, to the mountains, to our backyards or living rooms, or to the anonymity of a busy urban café to connect with God.

But solitude is not loneliness; it is actually the attachment to greater intimacy with God. It is a direct effort to commune with our creator. Listen to what Dallas Willard wrote on solitude in *The Spirit of the Disciplines*.

The normal course of day-to-day human interactions locks us into patterns of feeling, thought, and action that is geared to a world set against God. Nothing but solitude can allow the development of a freedom from the ingrained behaviors that hinder our integration into God’s order.

Our regular rhythms of daily life grind into us a pattern of thinking, feeling, and acting in the world that naturally pulls us away from God. These hourly, daily, weekly, and monthly rhythms deeply embed in us patterns of thought that must be disrupted. As individualistic as we would like to think of ourselves, we are deeply formed by the social patterns that we exist within. Solitude enables us the distance needed to see beyond these patterns. They open up the light to see the patterns of traps and worry that oppress us.

Consider again the moment we see this in Jesus’ life. It is at a moment of heightened influence, fame, and exposure. It is at a moment in which our whole world would tell us he is exceeding and needing to push more into it. But for Jesus, you almost get the sense that it is something that is of great distraction, and so Jesus retreats to his *erémos*.

Now, for us, this doesn’t have to be secluded place, *per se*; you could find this *erémos* in a prayer closet, or room in your house, or a hammock in your backyard. But wherever it is for you, the desert, the closet, the *erémos* is the beginning step toward strength. This is why Mark illustrates it so early in his account of Jesus’ life.

It is in this escape from the crowds into the lonely place that Jesus is able to fix his attention on God long enough and with enough duration and intensity to be able to stay centered on him. So too, with us, this is our task in practicing solitude. Solitude breaks us out of the rhythms and patterns of our daily life and creates space for connection with God. But as Calhoun noted, this practice is a container practice. So what do we see Jesus fill up this container in the text with? Jesus fills the container with the practice of prayer.

Prayer

Prayer naturally corresponds with the practice of solitude. Prayer is conversing and communicating with God—both in speaking, whether aloud or within our thought life, and in listening to the Lord.

The practice of prayer provides the patterns for attending to God throughout the day, especially when we retreat to the *erémos*. Prayer invites us into the divine dialogue of the trinity. It was Henri Nouwen in *The Way of the Heart*, defined prayer as “To pray is to descend with the mind into the heart, and there stand before the face of the Lord, ever-present, all-seeing, within you.”

Prayer is all of the ways in which we communicate and commune with God. It is to be fully present to yourself in the presence of God. This is why prayer sometimes is filled with words; other times, it should be filled with a quiet listening heart, and still other times, it should be an active engagement of back and forth between scripture and words to God.

To pray is not mere passivity; it is to bring about change. Prayer may be the central avenue that God uses to change us because it is when we pray that God slowly and graciously reveals to us our shadow sides and invites us into the light.

I personally have had a tenuous relationship with prayer because I have always wrestled with its efficacy. But then I understood that prayer is not about efficiency; it is not even about effectiveness; it is about communing with a posture of readiness to listen to all that God would have for us.

We have a tendency to make prayer harder than it ought to be. Certainly, prayer is something that must be learned, but it shouldn't be considered something that must be difficult. Repetition allows for prayer to become a learned natural tendency, not a difficult lofty thing.

Paul would indicate that where the gold is at in prayer is when we learn to pray "without ceasing." How do we do that? Certainly, he must have something in mind that is beyond folding our hands and closing our eyes as we go throughout our entire waking day. What Paul is alluding to is a life oriented around the reality of communion with God. We can train ourselves to invoke God's presence in the very actions of our daily lives.

God will meet us in love, and love will keep our minds directed toward him as the magnet pulls the needle to that of the compass. Habit will be confirmed in gracious interaction, and our whole lives will be bathed in the presence of God. Constant prayer will only "burden" us as wings burden the bird in flight. Willard

If you don't know where to begin in prayer, I invite you to memorize the Lord's prayer and then repeat it often. After integrating it into your life, you can begin to "riff" and expound on the prayer. Interjecting your own words into the framework of prayer before God. In the context of this story of Jesus, prayer was his ability to detach from the noise of his work and kingdom healings and attach to the vision and perspective of God. It both held Jesus close to his father so as to stay connected and charged, as well as helped navigate the potential distraction of the crowds and what they were offering him

Prayer is the means through which we connect and commune with God. But even with these two practices, there is a third in Jesus' equation for kingdom living, and it is one that seemingly functions as a posture in which we carry ourselves and come out of the intimacy with God in our solitude and prayer.

Secrecy

Now, the third practice we see in Jesus' paradigm for kingdom living is one that we would not normally see as a spiritual practice. And even more so, in our world, it may be the hardest of them all to implement—the practice of secrecy.

It is stunning to the modern, social media-saturated modern mind that Jesus would resist the opportunity for fame, status, and influence. When the crowds are gathered, and everyone is seeking to make much of Jesus, he retreats and leaves town. There is a sense of the secrecy of Jesus and his work through the Gospel of Mark. You will notice how often he tells people not to talk about what he has done for them. But the practice of secrecy is exactly as it sounds. It is doing Jesus-y stuff, Kingdom of God stuff, and to the best of your ability, not allowing others to find out about that work. We abstain from causing or allowing our good deeds and qualities to be known.

Few things have the ability to stabilize and deepen our apprenticeship to Jesus than the practice of secrecy. Primarily because, by its very nature, it strips us of pretense and the public performance of our faith. It then naturally centers not on what we do but on who we are becoming. It is slow and tedious in its work on us but nonetheless transformative. In this text, we see the example of Jesus asking for those he healed to not share about it, and then when they do and the crowds rise. Jesus finally said, "It'll be fine; let's go somewhere else."

Secrecy affords us the opportunity to experience and embody our apprenticeship and relationship with Jesus and detach and ensure that it isn't bound to the opinions and expectations of others. We do not naturally turn to secrecy. We want to post, tweet, capture, name, boast, etc., of all the ways in which living in the Kingdom of God would be advantageous to our status in the kingdom of this world. Every good deed we do tries to find its way into the limelight.

By its nature, it is a practice of denial and abstinence. It is to abstain from public performance or public praise. Ultimately, this is what we are seeking to overcome, our addiction for approval and goodness in the sight of all but God. A deed that exists for the sake of recognition is not ultimately for God, but its end goal is bent inward; that deed is actually for yourself.

Secrecy purifies our motives and exposes the ego to the refining balm of anonymity. Secrecy forces us to detach from the approval and recognition of others and simply live the reality of the Kingdom of God for its own sake.

Now, this set of practices we see right in the midst of Jesus' life: solitude + prayer + secrecy = practicing the life of the Kingdom of God. This is how the Kingdom of God slowly begins to transform our very lives. It is the slow work of renovating the heart through repeated practices that align us with an altogether different aim. For our modern moment, consider the way these practices enable us to live in this different reality.

The practice of solitude counters a world that assumes we must always be on, taking in every corner of information. The practice of prayer counters a world of ideology. It allows us to speak, listen, and commune with God, who transcends our understanding of the world here and

now. It enables us to tap into and renew our minds toward how the Kingdom of God would have us live right in the midst of this world.

The practice of secrecy counters a world that demands performative righteousness and starves the ego of its need for public approval and recognition. It understands power and influence not in terms of reach and effectiveness but in terms of faithfulness to the way of Jesus.

These counter dynamics of practicing the Kingdom of God are on full display in the narrative of Jesus' first day on the job of the Kingdom of God. The dynamics in which Jesus brought about and lived into the Kingdom of God are organized by a radically alternative understanding of power, success, and influence than the world around us. For Jesus, at what appeared from our perspective to be the moment to strike while the influence is at its height, he retreats. When the crowds and influence were growing, he doesn't launch a campaign and ride the wave of momentum; he humbly and quietly retreats into the lonely place for prayer.

For a world like ours of influence and power, bigger is better; Jesus espoused a fundamentally different and alternative ethos. This ethic and practice of secrecy was not simply a way for him to recharge before going back to work but was about the humility of the Kingdom of God and the connection to a different dynamic than the means on which we rely in our world.

Here we see an entirely different conception of how the Kingdom of God operates. It isn't just that Jesus is a step ahead; but rather, he perceives an altogether alternate reality about what influence, power, and success looks like. God's kingship, the reign of God, is fundamentally different.

While we would seize the opportunity of popularity and fame as advantageous for the promotion of the good and the expansion of the kingdom, these are not the metrics that Jesus seems to be interested in. His concern is about living faithfully in line with the kingdom, and the measures of success we would impose on Jesus are significantly different. Our participation in the Kingdom of God is powered by a different set of practices than the world.

This is the life of living in the Kingdom of God. This rhythm of solitude, prayer, and secrecy seems to have been a cornerstone of the spirituality of Jesus. It is how Mark illustrates and highlights the pattern of living in which Jesus would deeply engage with the world around him and then deeply retreat into communion with God alone.

Now, if this pattern was good enough for Jesus, it would certainly seem like it would be something good for us to integrate into our lives as well. This formula, for Jesus, was the backbone of life in the Kingdom of God: solitude, prayer, secrecy. It is creating space for the Kingdom of God in solitude.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

Having observed and seen the manner in which Jesus practiced living in the Kingdom of God, what do we do now? What we will recognize throughout the gospels is that these practices saturated Jesus' life. They were not a one-off moment but were part of the warp and woof of his life. In many respects, they constituted Jesus' life. *"But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (Luke 5:16).*

And so, this is our invitation to seek to practice the very things that Jesus himself practiced. They will look different for us as they did for Jesus. They will take a different shape and a different form because the structure of our lives are much different than Jesus' life, but fundamentally, the principles carry over.

This isn't about perfection, this isn't about having it all perfectly orchestrated in our lives, but it is about practice. This means it will take time. We will not get it right, but we continue to practice—taking practical and accessible steps forward in practicing the Kingdom of God in small ways. The life of the Jesus follower is one of organizing our life around the same practices that orchestrated Jesus' life but doing so in our own life.

What I love about what we see in the life of Jesus is how simple this practice is for us to take up. The immense practicality and accessibility of this practice is there for all of us. Every one of us can engage in this practice tomorrow. We can wake up earlier than normal or carve out space and time on our lunch break, and then we can pray, isolate, and not tell others about it.

Like the crowds that we see in this text, we can often get caught up in the miraculous and the powerful. We can get caught up in the grandeur of the acts of the kingdom, and there is a good reason. These are profound manifestations of the Kingdom of God breaking into our world in profound ways. But the ordinary pattern of life in the Kingdom of God is demonstrated by the patterns of simplicity in Jesus' life—solitude, prayer, and secrecy.

It is often in the mundane that we tap into the profound realities of the Kingdom of God. Consider Paul's words in Thessalonians, which strike a deep contrast to the way of the world around us *"...make it your ambition to lead a quiet life:" (1Thessalonians 4:11a).*

The Kingdom of God is about the quiet, the slow, the mustard seed that is growing, and the treasure buried in the field. It is the radically ordinary, the profoundly mundane. It is about the beauty in simplicity that reveals the deep realities of the Kingdom of God here and now.

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