

We are wrapping up our five-week vision series that we have entitled "Becoming the People of God." And all this series, we have been laying out what we believe the next four to five years will be for us as a church community. Our vision is to become a transformed people, transforming the peninsula. In order for us to do so, we recognize the importance of making it clear what it means to follow the invitation to follow Jesus. If we are going to become a transformed people, transforming the peninsula, we must begin to organize our lives around the primary goals of apprentices to Jesus.

### **Participation in Jesus' work**

Now, this all sounds really well and good, but I am still haunted by the question of how. How do we actually come to organize our lives together around these two goals? Last week we identified that what our souls need in order to center these goals is a trellis, or what has historically in the history of the church been called a "Rule of Life." A rule of life is a set of practices that organize and orient the habits of our regular days to help us practice presence with Jesus and participation in his work in the world.

We believe the future of CPC is a community of faith organized around a shared rule of life that enables us to practice presence to Jesus and participation in his work in the world. Here is a look at the rule of life we are stepping into. [Rule of Life Diagram](#).

We practice attentiveness to God in contrast to a world of distraction and hurry. We do so by cultivating habits of silence and solitude and Sabbath. We practice renewing the mind in contrast to a world of noise, competing narratives, and addictions. We do so by cultivating habits of fasting and scripture. We practice hospitality in contrast to a world of hostility, division, and isolation. We do so by cultivating habits of table welcome and evangelism. We practice vocation in contrast to a world of compulsive consumption. We do so by cultivating habits of open-handedness and contribution.

This morning as we wrap up our vision series, I want to talk about how presence to Jesus is the path of transformation. Because the first half of our rule of life are two practices that seek to accomplish the first goal of presence to Jesus. This message will launch us into the first practice of our rule of life, which is focused on attentiveness.

But before we jump into our text, here are a few thoughts on the why. In 2007, the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor released his seminal book entitled, *A Secular Age*. In the book, Taylor tries to unearth how it is that we have moved in the modern world 500 years ago to now, from belief in the divine, where belief in God seems to be relegated to a separate realm.

The book is 800 pages of dense philosophical and sociological history. Within the text, he coins a term for some of the shifting landscape in the modern world by declaring that we have shifted in what he calls our "social imaginary."

For Taylor, the social imaginary is the term he uses to define how people give shape to the manner in which they perceive and construct the world around them. These social imaginaries are constructed by a set of interlocking beliefs and practices, which their understanding of the world. It is their values, institutions, laws, and symbols as a whole.

Around the invention of the printing press and the Protestant Reformation, which shortly thereafter gave rise to the industrial revolution, there was a shift in the social imaginary away from reliance and connection to the divine and actually shifted toward commerce as the predominant means of meaning in the world.

Taylor's thesis was that as the modern world slowly shifted toward a world driven by commerce by both design and accident, it began to weaken spirituality and the sense of the divine. But the reason for this shift was that when commerce is the source of meaning in the world, as we talked about last week, acceleration, speed, more action, production, etc., became the center focus of the social imaginary.

This, in turn, downplayed silence and moved the general human experience to be more in favor of noise and constant action than it did for us to be still and present to both ourselves and the world around us. Where once contemplation and encounters with the divine were central, now production and encounters with the free market economy became central.

All this to say that the creeping rise of secularism came not from some sort of conflict with science; these two things are actually not in conflict, but rather the white noise of secularism crowded out the experience and felt the need for God, and speed and noise slowly eroded our attachment to God.

This is why we all feel so tired, all the time. Because the modern social imaginary is rooted in the belief that you are what you produce and what you consume. That is the central thing in which we behold! This drive and addiction for more of everything has led to what writer Andrew Sullivan called "Distraction Sickness." In 2016, he wrote a long-form article entitled "I Used to be Human" on this very issue and the intrusive ways that the digital, technological world has reordered his life. He stated,

**The roar and disruption of the Industrial Revolution violated what quiet still remained until modern capitalism made business central to**

## our culture and the ever-more efficient meeting of needs and wants our primary collective goal.

The article details his experience with checking into a monastery ( he was not a religious) for what he called a digital detox. He had realized that his online life and his addiction to accomplishment and accumulation had rendered him something akin to being less than human. He graphically writes about how in a sudden pang of panic, he had to turn his device on because he couldn't imagine life without his digital life. The social imaginary, to continue using Taylor's language, had been constructed with such force by modern digital capitalism that he could not imagine having to sit alone with his own thoughts with no ability to distract himself away.

The tiny cracks of stillness in his life were being filled with digital noise and distraction. Every corner of his life was consumed by the noise; his attention was being constantly berated by whatever the cultural thing was at the time. After the detox, he writes these words in reflection of his times of silence which he hadn't experienced for years.

**The smartphone revolution of the past decade can be seen in some ways simply as the final twist of this ratchet, in which those few remaining redoubts of quiet—the tiny cracks of inactivity in our lives—are being methodically filled with more stimulus and noise. And yet our need for quiet has never fully gone away because our practical achievements, however spectacular, never quite fulfill us. They are always giving way to new wants and needs, always requiring updating or repairing, and always falling short. The mania of our online lives reveals this: We keep swiping and swiping because we are never fully satisfied. Andrew Sullivan, *I Used to be Human*.**

You see, what has shifted in our modern world is that we are never fully present to anything or anyone, including ourselves. We are always in two places at once. We are at dinner, and on our phones. We are with our kids, but sneaking in a few emails. We are watching Netflix yet scrolling the endless stream of social media. Our lives are embedded in what Alan Jacobs calls "Ecosystems of interruption technologies." And that same writer, a few lines later, says that we are "living illustrations of Technological Stockholm Syndrome: We have embraced our kidnapper."

Now, I am not a Luddite that believes in some sort of mythical golden age that has never existed, but I do think that there is something that is slowly eroding our souls from the inside out. That there is something that is slowly, over time, causing us to be a little less human. Because the simple and profound truth that I want to present this morning is that:

### **We become what we give our attention to.**

And the modern social imagination of our world is designed to capture and distort the central focal point of our attention. The central focus of our attention will slowly give shape to our lives. So how do we resist these ecosystems of interruption technologies? How do we, as followers

of Jesus, carve out a way of resistance against the barrage of a world seeking to steal and capture our attention?

What we need is a life with God because Sundays alone are not going to do it. You undergo the transformative work of the Holy Spirit by cultivating a life rhythm that enters into the presence of the Spirit regularly.

We must learn to dwell with God. We must learn to practice the presence of God. If we are going to take seriously the task of growing into the kind of people that are more fully shaped by the character of Christ than by the litany of other sources that bombard us, then we must learn to live in a life organized around the attentiveness to God.

Psalms are a collection of Hebrew poetry and should be read as such. The Psalms details an honest dialogue of faith that was characteristic of the psalmist, particularly when they were facing hardship and opposition. "*The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?*" (Psalm 27:1)

Right out of the gate, here we see David wrestling in a battle. Because the rhetorical questions he asks here are, "whom shall I fear?" and "of whom shall I be afraid?" We can deduce that these are questions he is posing because he is facing some sort of turmoil. You do not ask rhetorically, "Who shall I fear?" unless the idea of having to fear someone is pressing in on you.

**When the wicked advance against me to devour me, it is my enemies and my foes who will stumble and fall. Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then I will be confident. vv. 2-3**

Now we see a larger picture coming into focus. What David is talking about and describing is that he is in a battle. War breaking out against him. We can relate to this idea of being in a battle. We may not be able to relate to the physicality of David's battle, but we, too, are in psychological battles, relational battles, social battles, and spiritual battles. The sort of upheaval that surrounds us is something akin to a battle. When we scroll social media, when we listen to or watch the news, and when we talk with our coworkers, we get a sense that the social upheaval is driving a chaos that feels like a battle for our very souls.

David is surrounded by all sorts of different forces and "enemies" that are pulling him to and fro. The wicked, the foes, the enemies, the armies, they are all pushing in around him. What David is juxtaposing in these first three verses is his divided attention. He is, on the one hand, in the midst of a battle, he is sensing enemies coming around him, but at the same time, he is, in verse 1, asserting his attentiveness to God in the midst of it all!

"The Lord is my light and my salvation..." For David and for ourselves, the questions posed before him is where will he give his attention? Will it be on that which is swirling around him or on God? But may I suggest, given what I spoke about in my introduction, that the greatest battle we are facing in terms of our apprenticeship and discipleship to Jesus is the battle for our attentiveness.

We are living now in what economists call the “attention economy.” By way of review, economics is the study of how scarce resources are allocated—housing, food, money, etc. The term “Attention Economy” was first coined by Nobel Laureate Herbert Simon, who believed that the bottleneck of human thought and innovation was that of a limited ability of human thought. Our limited attention spans restrain our ability to unleash our creativity.

We are living in the midst of a new historical moment in which among the scarcest resources is our own very attention. And the result of this new historical moment is one where our attentiveness is now commodified. The scarce resource of our attention is monetized, exploited, and distributed for sale to the highest bidder. When this happens with our attention, we eventually have everything vying for our focus because there is money to be made on our eyes locked onto a screen, fixed on a show, caught in the endless scroll of social feeds.

### **We become what we give our attention to.**

Jonathan Haidt, in his now somewhat infamous article in the Atlantic entitled, “Why the past 10 years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid,” traces a historical line between the advent of social media and the increasing polarization, anxiety, hatred, and discord. His thesis is that our attention has been monetized, and hatred, bad news, and anger are more addictive and “viral,” and therefore, systems have been set up to circulate that more and more in order to hold your attention longer and longer.

Now, if our attention is fixed on a sort of outrage society, driven by fear, anger, and polarization, are we all that shocked that we are living in the midst of rising mental health concerns, anxiety, fear, etc.? And listen, I know that as I even talk about this, there will be a thought we all have to wrestle with which is that this isn’t our problem; it’s their problem over there.

What do we do when the world feels like it is falling apart? How do we remain confident when turmoil and chaos envelop us? How do we push against the confines of the “attention economy”? How do we guard our souls and grow in Christlikeness in the midst of a culture that demands the scarcity of our attention be fought for in things other than God? What do we do about this problem? How do we rise above the struggle and take a small step of resistance in the battle for our attention? How do we find stability and growth in the midst of the “era of anxiety and fear”?

### **The One Thing**

David will clue us into this. *“One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple” (Psalm 27:4).* The scene shifts dramatically. The scene moves from that of the battlefield to the sanctuary. This is our clue as to how David is able to withstand the pressures that are forming around him. He is able to resist the forces and the battle because he has found himself taking refuge in the sanctuary.

“One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek...” There is a refined focus and directed attention. It probably goes without saying, but for

the sake of clarity, David is not speaking of becoming a priest or a Levite. The aim that David is seeking is to live in a constant connection to and awareness of God’s presence.

This is the antidote to so many of our ailing distractions. The one thing to counter the pervasive pull of distraction and hurry is to come to the place where we live in a constant state of connection to God.

I believe this is what Paul had in mind when he said, “pray continually.” This, for David, was the preoccupation of his life; the one thing he sought, the one thing he desired, was to bury his mind and his heart in the presence of God. What David has been able to figure out that has enabled him to resist the forces pressing in on him is two-fold. He has learned two things that have enabled him to “dwell in the house of the Lord.”

### **To dwell**

The Hebrew word here for dwell is the word *yashab*, which means to sit, remain, and dwell. Similarly to last week and Jesus’ teaching on abiding, so too this word, dwell carries the connotation of “making one’s home in.” It is to sit, remain, stay, dwell, and have one’s home.

Here is what David understands and what we can glean from his one request. When you dwell in the presence of God, it slowly becomes more and more apparent and present in your life. The presence of God increases in such a way that the presence of God begins to overwhelm you. It begins to mark your life and flow through you. Because it enables you to tune into the way in which God can work in a way that you cannot do under your own ability.

This is the path to transformation. You cannot, on your own, transform the innermost realities about you, but rather they become the overflow of that in which you dwell and that in which you behold. So when you slowly, over time, learn to dwell in God, you begin to enable the presence of the Holy Spirit to flow through your life.

The very character of that in which you dwell in will permeate your life and begin to flow in and through you. If you dwell in anger and fear and cursing, then what will give shape to your character is the same. We are created to be permeable people. The question is, what will we allow to permeate us? But when you dwell in the presence of God, you find the very character of God starts to flow out of you.

Where you were once resentful, you find yourself forgiving. Where you were once greedy, you find yourself generous. Where you once found yourself selfish, you now find yourself selfless. We are becoming what we give our attention to. If we dwell in other things, those are the things that will give shape to our lives. We must do the work of dwelling in God. The second thing David says we must do is,

### **To Behold**

The Hebrew word here for gaze or behold is *chazah*, which means to see, behold. This is an important follow-up to our dwelling because it directly correlates with where we dwell. What we behold, we ultimately will become. What we give our attention to, we become.

And the one thing that David desires to behold is the “beauty of God.” His desire is to allow that to become the preoccupation of his mind. Because when the beauty of God is the preoccupation of our minds, we will begin to take that on as our identity. Here is the terrifying reality of what it means to behold. We all know how to behold. And we all do behold something. And the output of that beholding is flowing through our lives now.

We behold our phones, our computers, and our entertainment. We fix our attention on ideology, on politicians, and on particular political means and ends. We fix our eyes on the news and Twitter feeds. All of these things we behold. To be human is to worship; it is to behold; it is to dwell in something. Nothing in this life is neutral because all of these things are shaping the core of who we are. The question is not do we know how to behold. By being human, that question is answered. The question is, who or what are we beholding?

We behold social media, comparison, and envy. We behold politics, power, and lust for control. We behold news and media, anxiety, and fear. We must learn to dwell in and behold the beauty of God because these become the very realities from which we live because we are all beholding something. And for most of us, the emotional pain and baggage that we carry on, largely from our childhood wounds, is what eventually starts to shape us.

We behold accumulation and accomplishment as the markers of the good life because they are means of coping with the childhood pains that we have experienced, and we are longing for a way out of that. You behold success thinking it will make you whole, but when we behold God, we find that we are loved not based on our accomplishments but on our identity as God’s.

But when we come to behold God beholding us, what we find is that we are beloved and held near to God himself in such a way that our wounds are exposed, treated, and healed. When we come to see God beholding us, we find that he looks at us with all of our sins, failures, and flaws, and his look doesn’t flinch. His love remains. Because ultimately, it is in beholding the triune God that we find our healing and our transformation.

The onslaught of our digital age is marked by systems, structures, and algorithms, that profit off of our outrage, our poor self-image, and our anger. So when we behold those things, they enter into our bodies in such a way where the fallout is devastating.

We behold God as a small act of resistance against the systems and structures that say you are not enough. That you are not good enough, strong enough, smart enough, beautiful enough, rich enough, powerful enough, all of it. When we behold God, we call out those lies for what they are, and we return to the loving, life-giving, transformative presence of God. Beholding God deconstructs the false images of the self that we have slowly, over time, internalized to the place where they have become the organizing principle and scars that give shape to our identity and our lives.

You become what you behold. *“One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek...that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life” (Psalm*

27:4). I would suggest that the question still remains, how? How do we go about dwelling and beholding God? How do we go about organizing a life toward that end?

This is why the first goal of any disciple or follower of Jesus is to learn how to be “Present” to Jesus. This is the fundamental first step if we are to develop and grow as a follower of Jesus. If we are going to create a discipleship that can sustain us and lead to greater Christlikeness, then we must take seriously the first goal of any disciple of Jesus, to be present to Jesus. But we are not left to our own devices. The church, throughout the ages, has developed and sought to create regular rhythms and practices that help enable us to dwell and behold God.

## **Practicing the Presence of God - Dwelling and Beholding**

What we have to push into is how do we create discipleship and a way that enables us to dwell in God and behold God when Brandon and the worship team aren’t there to help. When on Tuesday or Thursday, the week has been anything but life-giving, and you are still wrestling down the presence of God. What we must come to realize is that to counter the false narratives and stories that we, over time, come to embody, we must cultivate a life shaped by Jesus Christ.

Dallas Willard once wrote:

**The first and most basic thing we can and must do is to keep God before our minds. This is the fundamental secret of caring for our souls. Our part in this “practicing the presence of God” is to direct and redirect our minds constantly to Him...Soon our minds will return to God as the needle of a compass constantly returns to the north. If God is the great longing of our souls, He will become the pole star of our inward beings.**

A good argument could be made that the number one thing we can do as followers of Jesus is to learn how to dwell with God. For David, this was his goal that “all the days of his life,” he would dwell with God. To create space and margin in our days in our Mondays and Tuesdays, in our commutes and daily tasks, in our picking the kids up from school, in cooking dinner, in folding laundry, and in times of prayer and scripture, in walking the dog, in talking with a friend, in carrying on in everyday tasks, can we come to the place where we recognize that we are dwelling in the very presence of God.

Because you are becoming what you give your attention to. Transformation happens when we learn to dwell in the presence of God. When God becomes the orienting center of our lives, then we slowly begin to experience transformation. It was the 17th-century monk Brother Lawrence who spoke of this presence with God as “Practicing the Presence of God.”

## **Create Margin**

We live in a society that is overstimulated. It is saturated with noise, hurry, and distraction. Silence pierces through the noise in uncomfortable ways. But it is in slowing down that we are actually able to become more aware of that which we are beholding or dwelling in.

## Silence and Solitude Before God

Next week we will begin a three-week series followed by a four-week practice lab where we explore this ancient practice of silence and solitude before God. Silence and solitude are a way to cut through the noise of a culture obsessed with hurry and distraction. It is a way in which we cultivate rhythms where we become more in tune with who we are and bring that self before God. Silence and solitude are the manners in which we cultivate margin in our lives to simply be with God and allow the transformative work of his Spirit to take root in our lives.

## Sabbath

We will be launching this habit into our community this coming Spring. We will take a deep dive into what it looks like to integrate Sabbath as a regular habit in our lives. Sabbath functions as an act of both rhythm and resistance. It is an act of rhythm because we find that Sabbath is part and parcel to how God actually created the world. Secondly, it is an act of resistance in that it pushes against the incessant pull of our world to more accumulation and more accomplishment.

Sabbath creates a margin for us in our overly busy lives to actually connect with the very presence of God.

## Embrace Boredom and Slowing

What is happening in these small pockets of boredom is we are feeding our brains to either sit with ourselves or to distract away what God might be doing or saying to us. We have to come to terms with the reality that every second of the day is not meant to be crammed in with more intake. If we are to practice the presence of God, we must come to embrace boredom and slowing as not only an acceptable reality but a necessary one.

Simply to disconnect from the machine of the modern world that demands more than any human is meant to bear, we must embrace slowing, small pockets of resistance against the social imaginary that would demand everything from us. What you will find as you create rhythms of slowing down is that boredom will set in, but this isn't always to be resisted because it is in moments of boredom that we find out the ways our lives have become disintegrated.

## Practice the Presence of God

But we were also never meant to remain disintegrated. In this state of disintegration, we begin to practice the presence of God. This was a term coined by the 17th-century monk Brother Lawrence. His idea in this phrase is that there are small, subtle ways in which you can remain attentive to the presence of God in whatever the mundane tasks of the day are. It is in boredom and slowing that we find our lives more integrated and centered in the presence of God.

## All is Grace - God is Beholding You

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

Every act of beholding God that we can muster is simply an act of response to God first beholding us. This is the ache that God is filling with his presence. So many of us carry around in our minds a view of God that is waiting for us to screw up. We carry around guilt and shame and assume that God is lurking, waiting to catch us so he can punish us. But the image I hope that you resonate with is not this image, but that all of this is grace. What I have found over time in beholding God is that, ultimately, God is beholding me.

Regardless of if I pray enough, God is beholding me. Regardless of if I am studying scripture enough, God is beholding me. Regardless of if I am good enough, proper enough, successful enough, or whatever, God is beholding me. Because this is the fundamental posture of God toward the world. The very core of God's existence is love, and this love is the place and the space in which we find healing for the wounds that we have carried around in us, be it from our childhood, our mistakes, our failures, our social setting, whatever it is. God is beholding us. And may we embrace this love of God.

To close, I want to look down at the closing verses of this particular Psalm in verses 13-14. After all that David had wrestled through. After all of the battle and the enemies and all that was plaguing him, David found the resolve in God beholding him. This is our greatest act of resistance against a world that says we are never enough, and will never have enough.

**I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord. vv. 13-14**

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