



“Contemplative Rhythms for an Exhausted Life”

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Luke 5:12-16

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The speed of life has gotten faster over the years. Our means of transportation and travel are faster, connectivity through the digital world continually increases, and we have news and information right at our fingertips at any given time. We just do not have to wait as long for most things anymore, generally speaking. Our calendars are bursting at the seams and there is always something we could be doing. Truth telling time: how often do you respond to the question, “How have you been?” with “Oh, I’ve been busy.” We are busy people. We fill our lives with activities, events, meetings, and more meetings. It never feels like we have enough time to do all that we want to do and need to do. It gets overwhelming.

There is no denying that this pace of life is unsustainable. I think we realize that deep within. But the big problem is what gets pushed out of our lives when we move at such a fast, busy speed: life with God. God tends to get the short end of the stick, if we are being honest. Maybe we will not sacrifice connection with family and friends, but God gets squeezed out of our schedule. We offer our one or two hours a week at most by attending worship and maybe a small group, but that is it. And I am not saying this to condemn you or make you feel badly but to be honest about where a lot of people are at. This is a consequence of shallow formation. It barely scratches the surface of the fullness of God.

But what if there was another way? What if there was a different rhythm of life, one “that could instead enable us to deeply connect with God, a lifestyle not dominated by hurry and exhaustion but by margin and joy? As long as we remain enslaved to a culture of speed, superficiality, and distraction, we will not be the people God longs for us to be.”¹ If we want to connect deeply with God, we will need to go at God’s speed. And let’s be honest, God never moves as fast as we want. We need to slow down and go at God’s pace. As we do, we will quickly realize God is not in a hurry. God is not in a rush. Think about it in terms of a leisurely walk. When we slow down, we are able to observe what is around us. We notice the beauty of the trees and flowers. We notice the fresh dew on the blades of grass. We notice the different shades of green. We become aware. By slowing down, we have the opportunity to encounter God. This rhythm of life is not new. This rhythm is the way of the monastic, contemplative life.

Monastic spirituality is marked by an intentional commitment to slowing down our lives to be with God. It is being present to God all throughout the day, a concept popularized by Brother Lawrence, a Carmelite monk from the 17th century. Brother Lawrence wrote a book called *The Practice of the Presence of God*. The concept is simple: in every activity, remember that God is present with you and offer your heart to God in prayer. So simple, you might say, for a monk living in a monastery. How could this even be possible in modern life, outside of a monastery? I’m glad you asked. It is not about perfection but increasing our awareness and growing towards a life marked by prayer, silence, and solitude.

Our scripture lesson today reveals that even Jesus recognized the importance of stepping away and spending time in prayer, silence, and solitude. Our passage of interest is one of the healing narratives, but I am not going to focus on the healing itself. Rather, I would like to zero in on the last part of this passage. Verses 15 and 16 read “News of him spread even more and huge crowds gathered to listen and to be healed from their illnesses. But Jesus would withdraw to deserted places for prayer.” This is at the beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry. The passage preceding this narrative is the calling of Jesus’ first disciples, as told by Luke. Jesus had just started going around teaching, preaching, and healing. Word about him and his miraculous power was spreading quickly. More and more people were gathering, eager to listen to his words and receive healing. Jesus’ days were filled with teaching, preaching, and healing, and probably an increasing number of encounters and meetings with those who questioned the legitimacy of his identity and ministry. Jesus was busy. I can attest that the work of ministry is wonderful, life-giving, and fulfilling. But I can also attest that it

¹ Rich Villodas, *The Deeply Formed Life* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2020), 5-6.

can be exhausting: mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Giving of yourself and pouring out to others comes at a cost. So what did Jesus do? Did he keep on pushing, ignoring the internal warning signs? No. Instead we see Jesus withdrawing from the crowds, from the busyness, and going into deserted places to pray. He would enter into places of solitude so that he could be alone and pray. Let this serve as an example for us. If Jesus Christ himself, the second Person of the Trinity, recognized the importance of solitude and prayer, and acted upon it, then so should we. Taking time in prayer and solitude gave Jesus the opportunity to commune with his Father. It was a time of renewal, listening, and preparation for whatever came next. These times of prayer and connection were crucial to Jesus and his ministry. Jesus led a contemplative life.

The contemplative, monastic life has been the rhythm of life for countless Christians over the centuries. While monastic spirituality has existed in one form or another all throughout history, a significant surge in monasticism occurred when Constantine converted to Christianity in the 4th century and made Christianity the state religion. Christianity, once a persecuted religion, was now acceptable and decriminalized in the Empire. However, this led to a new crisis of faith. Church historian Justo Gonzales wrote “The narrow gate of which Jesus had spoken had become so wide that countless multitudes were hurrying through it- many seeming to do so only in pursuit of privilege and position, without caring to delve too deeply into the meaning of Christian baptism and life under the cross.”² Christianity became a means of political and cultural power, not the renunciation of sin and entering into life with God. The price of following Jesus dropped drastically. And dare I say, some things don’t change over time. It was in this context that many Christians decided to escape to the desert, to solitary places, and cultivate a life with God. These desert mothers and fathers teach us that following Christ “requires a steadfast refusal to get caught up in the pace, power, and priorities of the world around us.”³ The values and priorities of the world easily take over but we must be resolute in our desire to slow down and be with God. We can remedy the problem with the contemplative life.

The contemplative life is marked by certain practices, which we will explore now. We will focus on silent prayer, *lectio divina*, and keeping sabbath. These are not the only contemplative practices that help shape and form us in Christ but are good places to start.

Our first contemplative practice is silent prayer. You might be thinking, well, isn’t most prayer silent? Yes, but this contemplative practice is more than not speaking your prayers out loud. Silent prayer is “the practice of focusing our attention upon God through the simplicity of shared presence. It’s a surrender of our words to be present with the Word (Jesus).”⁴ It is about nurturing and developing our relationship with God. It is not about technique but the gift of spending time with God. Silent prayer can be a struggle. It often feels uneventful and we are prone to get bored. We expect to feel something to confirm that we did it right. But the truth is that we are not seeking a particular feeling but seeking God. It will not always feel powerful and inspirational. But God honors our persistence and in those moments of prayer is shaping and forming us in ways we cannot see. Silent prayer is not easy but is something we grow into over time. Another struggle with silent prayer is distractions. Our mind wanders. We struggle to focus. We start with a quiet mind but then all of a sudden you realize you are thinking about something else. If this is your experience, good news: you’re human and God knows it! Distractions are inevitable but they do not have to have the final say. Distractions serve as an opportunity to return to God, every single time. Bring your focus back to God. Continue offering your attentive presence and when your mind wanders, return to God. There is a reason these are called spiritual practices. It takes time, effort, and commitment, but will become easier and feel more natural over time. And remember that God is gracious and patient. God just wants us to come home. God is waiting for us with open arms.

Here is how you can practice silent prayer this week. Find a quiet place and settle in. Open with a couple minutes of silence, no word (you can set a timer on your phone if that helps keep you focused). Then read a psalm or short passage of scripture. Return to a couple of minutes of silence, being receptive to what God is speaking to you. Close out your time of prayer by offering the prayer on your heart, or journal it if that is a practice you enjoy. Don’t set yourself up for defeat by trying to sit in silence for 10 minutes. Do what is tangible, accessible, and the most likely to stick.

Our next contemplative practice is *lectio divina*. This is a slow, sacred reading of scripture. This is one of my favorite contemplative practices and I love leading people through the process of *lectio divina*. This is a way of

² Villodas, 15.

³ Villodas, 16.

⁴ Villodas, 23.

meditating on God's word until it sinks deeply into our hearts. With *lectio divina*, you slowly read through a passage of scripture, usually 3-4 times. This is done through four movements: *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio*, or reading, meditating, praying, and contemplation. I will share with you my preferred way of doing *lectio divina*.

First select a passage of scripture roughly 10-12 verses long. Psalms are a good option, as well as narratives from the gospels. In the first movement, *lectio*, slowly read through the passage and take notice of what word or phrase stands out to you. Repeat it to yourself. Next, read the passage again. This time, take note of what feelings, emotions, thoughts, or memories rise up within you. This movement is *meditatio*, so let the words resound within you as you meditate on what the words and what they have evoked within you. Next, read the passage once more. Enter into a time of prayer, *oratio* being aware of any prayerful response that arises within you, listening for what God might be inviting you to in light of the passage. Finally, rest in God's presence, *contemplatio*. This is not a time of further examination or exploration, but just being in God's presence.

Our final contemplative practice is Sabbath. Sabbath is about rest and the reminder of our limits. Our bodies, minds, and souls all get fatigued with the fast pace we live at. We were not made to work ourselves to death. When God created the world, God took the seventh day and rested. Humanity was created on the 6th day, so immediately following our creation, we enjoyed rest in God's presence. They hadn't even done anything yet but were granted rest. This serves as a lesson for us. Sabbath is not something we earn, it is a gift. Sabbath is not something we can have once we check off everything from our to-do list and finish everything that needs to get done. In truth, things will be left unfinished. Tasks will be waiting for us. We have an inflated sense of self-worth at times, thinking that without us nothing will get done, that if we take a rest everything will come undone. The world does not revolve around us. We are so accustomed to being productive and efficient but in the process, we neglect being present with God, others, creation, and ourselves. We need to rest. Making productivity an idol will only hurt us in the long run. We need to let go and enter into the rest God invites us to.

All that being said, taking Sabbath is one of those things that sounds wonderful in theory but is much harder when it comes to actually implementing it in your life. A whole day God, really? That feels aspirational at best, impossible at worst. So maybe let's find a starting point that is doable and build our way up. Let's hold the weekly Sabbath day as our goal, but what would it look like to start with one whole day each month or a few hours once a week, maybe a morning or an afternoon? I will give you a glimpse into my life. I work a half day on Fridays, typically taking the morning off and working in the afternoon. I also come in during the late morning on Mondays, but that is because I use early Monday morning to catch up on errands and do our grocery shopping. That does not count as Sabbath, as much as I enjoy grocery shopping. The point of Sabbath is not to work or expend a lot of energy. My current Sabbath time amounts to 4 hours on a Friday. Is it perfect? No. Do I find myself doing work in those hours? Sometimes. It depends on the season. For me, Sabbath is a time to step away from the busyness of ministry and life and to just enjoy rest and simple pleasures: a good cup of coffee, reading, spending time with a friend. I don't spend every minute in prayer and scripture. It is answering God's command to rest and to simply be, to enjoy my favorite things.

I want you to know that Rev. Call and I are in this with you. We have not achieved perfection around contemplative rhythms, or any of this, for that matter. We are also in the process of being deeply formed. We hope that this series will help usher you into a deeper life of faith. For example, at the start of the week, I found myself saying to God "I have more things to do this week than I have time for, God." Anyone else have a similar conversation? But rather than axing time spent with God, which is so easy to do, I decided to make it a priority. Did that magically make my to-do list shrink? No, in fact it grew longer. Instead, it rooted me in God's presence and love, allowing me to start my day with quiet and a fresh perspective. It filled my tank so that I could more effectively be present to others. The time we spend in God's presence positively impacts our presence with others throughout our day and allows us to be present in each moment. "To be deeply formed is to regularly come back to a different rhythm- a rhythm marked by communion, reflection, and a life-giving pace that enables us to offer our presence to the present moment."⁵ Contemplative rhythms help open us to God's presence and God's way of being. God is committed to our transformation- not just simply improving our lives, but infusing our lives with God's presence. May we ground our lives in the slower, intentional way of contemplative rhythms, rooting ourselves in the way of Jesus and the deeply formed life. Amen.

⁵ Villodas, 16-17.