

Spiritual Disciplines: *Be Still and Know*

Vineyard Church of Milan

10/5/08

[play "Be Still" video]

1 *God is our refuge* and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.

*2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,*

*3 though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging.*

*4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy place where the Most High dwells.*

*5 God is within her, she will not fall;
God will help her at break of day.*

*6 Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;
he lifts his voice, the earth melts.*

*7 The LORD Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.*

8 *Come and see what* the LORD has done,
the desolations he has brought on the earth.

*9 He makes wars cease
to the ends of the earth.
He breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields [d] with fire.*

*10 "Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth."*

*11 The LORD Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.*

Before we begin, let's spend **60 seconds responding** to God's invitation, to his command. 1 minute of stillness, **cultivating an awareness of his nearness and holiness, his goodness and his Godness.**

May I suggest you close your eyes and direct your mind and heart to attend to God and God alone. Perhaps, if you desire, you could choose that simple phrase from the last verse – “The LORD Almighty is with us” – and repeat it silently in your mind, over and over as a way of reminding yourself of the truth that you are giving your attentions to. *The LORD Almighty is with us. The LORD Almighty is with us. The LORD Almighty is with us.*

I'll start us off by saying that 1 time out loud, and after the minute is up, I'll say it one more time, and then we'll open with a prayer to kick things off, including a prayer for one of our sister churches in this community.

[set timer, and begin: *The LORD Almighty is with us ...*]

[Pray, including Milan Baptist...]

How was that? For some of you, I bet that was **refreshing**, invigorating. For most of you, I bet that was **challenging** – so many thoughts, distractions. You pushed through, but it took some real effort. For some of you it may have been **darn near impossible**. You may have been nearly instantly restless, ready for the torture to be over. Don't worry; there's hope – but more on that later...

We just completed our “It's Personal” series, and we'll be diving back into our series on the book of Acts next week, but **this week, something a little different**. Today we kick off an interval series on **Spiritual Disciplines**, or if that language doesn't make sense to you, Spiritual Practices. The idea being that conventional wisdom suggests it takes 21 to 40 days to form a habit, **so we'll try to take one Sunday every 3 to 6 weeks to tackle a new Spiritual Discipline**, and practice it together as a community over that time frame. Today, for example, we're going to focus on a form of contemplative prayer, **Be Still and Know That I Am God prayer**, if you will; called by some “centering prayer” and by others, “prayer of the presence” and by the Quakers, “centering down.” Sometime later in October, or maybe in November we might talk about fixed hour prayer, or fasting, or solitude, or fellowship, or who knows...

It's worth talking about **the whole idea of spiritual disciplines** or practices briefly, before we get to deeply into any particular discipline, so that we can **all understand what they are all about, how they are designed to impact our relationship with God**, what role they play in spiritual formation and growth.

The idea of spiritual disciplines is perhaps most easily understood **by thinking about learning to play a sport or a musical instrument**. If your end goal is be able to hold your own on a tennis court, simply jumping into the game and giving it a shot is just fine, but **you'll reveal all sorts of growth areas in the process**. Just playing more won't produce the kind of progress you want to make. **You need some tennis disciplines or practices**. You've got to develop your **body** in ways that help you play effectively, you've got to develop your **mind** in terms of your understanding of the game, and you've got develop some skills **and muscle memory**. So you do all sorts of small simple steps as part of your training, some of which may seem unrelated at first to actually playing the game of tennis. You may **jump rope** every day to develop quickness and strengthen your legs. You may **squeeze wrist exercisers** to strengthen your wrists and fingers to help you have more control over your racquet. You may spend **hours hitting balls** from a ball machine, tossing the ball for serves, volleying the ball on your racquet. And that's just the tip of the iceberg. **Each of those activities**, if you do them regularly and intentionally, **is a discipline**. Those of you who have learned to play instruments have had similar experiences... [*developing embouchure for trumpet*].

Spiritual growth happens in much the same way. Our **end goal** may be to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. But **we've got a long ways** to go, don't we? We learn to talk to God, to trust God, to obey God, to enjoy God. We learn to forgive people, to bless those who curse us, to serve, to receive blessing with thanksgiving, to confess and repent, to rejoice with those who rejoice, to mourn with those who mourn, to heal the sick, to cast out demons, to announce good news to the poor, and on and on. **Spiritual disciplines are the exercises we devote ourselves to and the habits we develop that help us to live as citizens of the kingdom of God** and join with God as he brings his kingdom here on earth as it is already in the heavens.

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes

into strict training...Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave...

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

In 2nd Corinthians he talks about taking every thought captive to Christ. The idea of spiritual disciplines is **to allow every area of our life, heart, soul, mind, and strength to come under the Lordship of Jesus**, under the influence of the kingdom of God. So that **we are servants only to Jesus**, and not servants to this world nor even servants of our own misguided appetites and misplaced affections.

And the truth is, regular, intentional ways of cooperating with the Holy Spirit can **have the impact of actually changing us**, of changing how we think and feel and live and move and have our being, as Paul so beautifully says in Athens.

[Recent brain research revealing all sorts of fascinating things that suggest we've sold ourselves short in the area of disciplines generally...]

Let's talk about this discipline of **being still and knowing** that God is God.

Think for a moment **how incredibly enriching it is to be still** with another human being, and know them for who they are. Nursing a baby, perhaps. Sitting at the bedside of a dying parent. Sharing silent moments with someone with whom you have fallen in love. In the stillness, somehow, love itself seems to go to work on our souls, doesn't it?

Now **think about how rarely those moments happen** in our lives.

The **momentum of our culture is towards busyness and speed and efficiency**, isn't it? What's the fastest route from here to there? When's it supposed to start, and when will we be able to get out of there? How much do we have to get done and how little time do we have to do it in?

And how many things are there in our culture **competing for our attentions and energy?** New things screaming to be bought. More money to be made. New desires to be satisfied. New videos to watch, hyperlinks to click, emails to be

read, phone calls to return, texts to respond to, instant messages dinging, advertising shouting for us to pay attention. **Driving us insane**, almost literally in some cases.

And **the world has shrunk so fast**, heaving unprecedented emotional weight and stress on individual human beings. The **whole world is so accessible** to us through travel and media and the internet **that our natural insulation** from great worldwide problems and worries **is nearly gone altogether**. Economic crises, natural disasters, dangerous criminals, genocide, political unrest, famine, diseases, injustices from all around the world **come into our awareness, at an overwhelming pace**, every day.

Our lives are so abuzz, so vibrating with stimulation and desires and anxieties and distractions that **it is a wonder we can ever be still**. Let alone be still with God.

I would venture to say that **perhaps some of us never have been**. Never quieted the demands and the voices and the vibrating of the soul **for the simple purpose of being still and allowing yourself to become aware of God's presence with you, and knowing him simply for who he is, The LORD Almighty**.

No agenda, nothing you're expecting from him or hoping from him. Just being with him for the sake of being with him. If he wants to say something, **you're there to hear**. If he wants to give you something, **you're there to receive**. If he wants to ask something of you, you're there to respond. If he simply wants to *be* with you, **you are there to be**.

It's **no surprise** that he would invite us to do that, though, is it?

After all, he's our Father, the lover of our souls, and **he longs for us to know him and for us to know that we are known by him**.

And after all, **don't we need to know that he is God?** That **he is exalted** above everything else? That **he is the LORD Almighty** and **he is with us?**

News of economic crisis hits us. And we begin the momentary stationary panic in our souls. We've got to do something, right? **Our soul buzzes**.

Family needs, pressures at work, health concerns, unsatisfied longings, personal failures, losing battles against our sinful natures, homework to be done, tests to take. **Our soul buzzes.**

We develop **symptoms of the soul buzzing** – coping mechanisms like alcohol or pornography or impulsive spending money or gambling or binging on video games or overeating or escaping into fantasy; **fault lines in our emotional, spiritual, mental and physical well being** that get expressed in anger or anxiety or jealousy or self-loathing, stress that begins to impact our health by lowering our immune responses to illness or causes headaches or muscle tension, and **on and on.**

What might happen if we listen to the invitation of God to be still and know that he is God? It's not just this Psalm; the invitation is expressed throughout the scriptures:

"Be silent Israel and listen! You have now become the people of the LORD your God."
Deuteronomy 27:9

Search your hearts and be silent. **Psalm 4:4**

"The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him." **Habakkuk 2:20**

"Give ear and come to me; listen, that you may live." **Isaiah 55:3**

"Come to me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest." **Jesus in Matthew 11**

Jesus knows what we need. He knows what it is to be a human being in this world. And he knew the value of the discipline of being still before his heavenly Father.

But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed. **Luke 5:16**

He often (that's the discipline part of it) withdrew to lonely places (that makes space for stillness, doesn't it?) and prayed (that's the being with God part).

What might happen if we were to develop the discipline of being still and knowing that God is God? Is it possible that the **very act of being present with God**, of finding rest in God, of listening attentively to God, the very act of being still so that the only one with permission to move us is the LORD Almighty, is it possible

that being still and knowing that God is God on a regular basis **might lead to transformation of our souls?**

Thomas Merton writes:

The message of hope the contemplative offers you is not that you need to find your way through the jungle of language and problems that today surround God, but that God loves you, is present in you, lives in you, dwells in you, calls you, saves you, and offers you an understanding and light which are like nothing you ever found in books or heard in sermons.

My Soul waits in silence for God only; from him is my salvation. Psalm 62:1 (NAS)

Isn't it true that salvation happens when the kingdom of God is present? When the rule and reign of the living God *replaces* the rule and reign that we try ineffectively to exercise; when the rule and reign of **the living God replaces the rule and reign of addictions** we find ourselves enslaved to, **salvation is happening**. When our souls learn to find rest in God alone, the God who is exalted over everything else, **they become freed from the need to find false rest in false gods. *From him is my salvation.*** When our souls learn to find rest in God alone, **they stop agitating our emotional lives and producing destructive responses** like anger and anxiety and all the rest. ***From him is my salvation.*** When our souls learn to find rest in God alone, **they stop acting like metaphysical allergens** to our bodies, and our bodies finally get some breathing room. ***From him is my salvation.***

But enough theory and analysis of how it all works or might work. **God wants us not just to be hearers of the word, but doers, right?** *Be still and know that I am God* is his simple command.

[*observation about **culture of individuality**, even when it comes to things spiritual. But not the culture of the early church, nor of the Jewish community of which Jesus was a part...**spirituality is a communal pursuit**; we learn together, practice together, grow together, hear from God together – this much at least we've learned from the first 7 or 8 chapters of Acts, right?*]

Here's my recommendation (understand that I'm no expert; I have some limited experience with this, but most of what I'm passing on to you I've gathered from mentors and writers with lifetimes of experience):

For the next 40 days, **discipline yourself to take 5 minutes a day** (growing into up to 20 minutes) to be still before God. (That'll be 15 hours over the course)

Find a place and time you can be physically still and unlikely to be interrupted (this may take some intentionality).

Pick a verse or title of God or short prayer to use to bring your focus on God (The LORD Almighty is with us, or Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior, or Be still and know that I am God, or Father of Lights, etc.) and **repeat it regularly** as you attend to the presence of God with you.

Whenever you notice **distraction** or thoughts drifting, **identify it, capture it, and give it to the Lord.**

Romano Guardini (German priest and academic): "When we try to compose ourselves, unrest redoubles in intensity, not unlike the manner in which at night, when we try to sleep, cares or desires assail us with a force that they do not possess during the day."

C.S. Lewis' comment that this isn't meant to be one's daily bread prayer, because it's hard 😊

Don't worry about any results or success during any particular prayer. Doesn't matter if it was hard, easy, rewarding, boring, wonderful, peaceful, anxiety producing, spiritual, totally lame, etc. It only matters that you are making yourself available to God.

As Richard Foster writes: "We willingly 'waste our time' in this manner as a lavish love offering to the Father."

[*Dave Nixon's story after 1 year*]

As you have opportunity, **share with somebody** what's going on, what your learning, what's frustrating. Talk about it in your small group. Help each other learn from one another. That's part of what it means to be a community of disciples.

[Now try it all together for 5 minutes, followed by Arms of Love and communion]