



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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“Wisdom for the Long Haul” (Encounters with Jesus Series)

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At 21 years of age, as a senior in college, I came to Christ. By the time I was 24, I was fulfilling a dream in becoming a missionary working at a refugee camp in the Philippines. I thought I had just won the lottery! I was so excited to serve God full-time.

About sixth months into it, I awakened on an early Sunday morning before sunrise. I was to preach that morning at a church in the camp, but my head felt horribly dizzy. I ended up crawling the 50 feet to the bathroom and got very sick. For the next 45 minutes I just sat there barely able to move. I eventually crawled back and told my roommate to get someone else to preach for me.

Later a doctor examined me. I was expecting him to tell me I had some sort of tropical disease. Instead, he said me there is nothing wrong with me. I was just exhausted.

Exhausted?!?! I was 24 years old in the physical prime of my life; working only six months in a job I loved. But the reality was I had simply burned out and my body gave way. Has anyone experienced something like that?

Today, as we continue in our series of encounters with Jesus, we come across a couple of

remarkable little incidences that years ago when I first started out in ministry really left me scratching my head. But as the years went by, boy did I see the wisdom in what Jesus did. It was wisdom living for the long haul in the face of so many demands on your life.

The first scene is found in Mark 1:32-39. It's during the beginning of Jesus' ministry. After 40 days of being in the wilderness Jesus is now teaching powerfully, casting out demons, healing the sick, etc. As a result, people are flocking to Him.

Let's read from this passage. *“That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. ³³ The whole town gathered at the door... ³⁴ and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. ³⁵ In the morning, while it was still very dark, He (Jesus) got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. ³⁶ And Simon and his companions hunted for him. ³⁷ When they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.” ³⁸ He answered, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” ³⁹ And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.”*

Let's unpack this a bit and focus in on one particular odd issue I see here.

As we saw, people are piling up to meet with Jesus. A preacher's dream! People with all kinds of diseases and demons are jammed up at a house where He is staying. And what is the response of Jesus to all this need? Let's go someplace else!! (verse 38: “Let us go on to neighboring towns...”).

What's up with that?!?! As a former church planter this is really *not* a good church planting technique. When people flock to see you, you don't walk away. You should take advantage of that and reach out to these folks.

What I find interesting here is the disparity of response between Jesus and the disciples. For the disciples, all the action and demands around them, all the voices calling them, dictated their direction and response to the situation.

Notice how the disciples act when they see the crowd searching for Jesus. In verse 36 it says that they literally “hunted down” Jesus. This is no casual, “Hey, anyone know where Jesus is?” This was an intense, and likely, frantic search.

And notice what they do when they find Him praying.

They don't seek to join Jesus in prayer, but call Him out from it in order for Jesus to serve more people.

Again for the disciples, all the action and demands around them, all the voices calling them, dictated their direction and response to the situation. But those *very same things* had absolutely no effect on Jesus! Why? I think the answers to that question can drastically change our lives.

I love this little episode because I think it rams into one of the biggest issues that drains our souls and throws us off course with God and others. And it is this issue of busyness. Anyone feel like these folks? (picture of extremely busy people). If you don't feel like this you're one of the few lucky ones.

According to several workplace studies from 2015 we are *way overworked*. Nearly 40% of full-time workers work at least 50 hours or more a week. Nearly one in five work a grueling 60 hours or more. If you are a salaried worker then a full 25% of you put in at least 60 hours per week.

And it's not just folks like you that wrestle with working so many hours. Over 70% of pastors are so stressed and burned out that they regularly consider leaving the ministry. In fact, between 1,500 to 2,000 people leave vocational ministry every month. 90% of pastors work more than 50 hours a week. More than half work 60 hours a week.

And here's a shocker. The number one cause of marital problems for pastors is: a lack of family time. I can't imagine why.

John Ortberg has said: "It's not just that we wrestle with these forces (of busyness); it's that we

glorify them. Busyness, fatigue, over-scheduling become signs of being important. Dorothy Bass noted that the fourth commandment (keeping the Sabbath) is the only one that people, even people in ministry, commonly boast about breaking."

Do you think there is something to this? Do you think sometimes we hold busyness as a "badge of honor"? I know I did as a young minister. I used to enjoy opening up my Day Timer in front of people because it was so filled with black ink; filled with all those appointments I had. It made me feel so important.

Why make a big deal about this? Because busyness is a killer to your relationship with God and your relationships with others. As the late spiritual giant, Dallas Willard, wisely pointed out: "Hurry is the great enemy of the spiritual life in our day. You must *ruthlessly eliminate hurry* from your life."

I think he is on to something here because we are drenched in a culture of hurry...it will mean that we have to make very intentional and *difficult* measures to change. In light of all these realities, let me offer some wisdom from Jesus in this episode we just read in Mark, as well as one in Luke.

First, if you want to ruthlessly eliminate hurry: Be absolutely clear about what God has given you to do in this world.

Notice how Jesus responds to the frantic and excited words of the disciples when they say, "Everyone is looking for you".

In verse 38 it says, "Jesus answered, 'Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may

proclaim the message there also; *for that is what I came out to do.'*"

Note how clear Jesus is about who He is and what He is about. And this kind of clarity makes Him free to say, "Yes" to this and equally free to say, "No" to that without guilt or hesitation.

Do you have *that kind of clarity* in your heart and soul as the next request for your time comes up? As the next request for helping others comes your way? As the next complaint at work comes flying at you? As the next opportunity for a money making venture arises? As the next opportunity for your kids to get involved with X, Y and Z?

How many times do we say, "Yes" to some request simply because we feel guilty saying, "No" or feel so *professionally obligated* to say, "Yes".

When I was a younger minister my denomination would have me speak all over the place here and on the mainland, so I was away from home weeks at a time. My kids were very young at this time. My "yes" to all that speaking meant "no" to being home with my wife and two young kids.

That is something to be aware of, whenever say "yes" to something it will mean a "no" to something else. We need to really weigh that and count the cost of that reality. When I said "yes" to all that speaking, it said "no" to spending time with my wife and kids. And I assure you that did not go over very well.

I used to argue often with my wife: "But *that's my job!* I'm a preacher. That's what I'm supposed to do. How can I possibly say, 'No' to my boss?"

Eventually when all that “service to God” was wreaking havoc in my family I had to tell my supervisors to cancel the speaking engagements. They were not happy and were deeply disappointed. And I hate having people disappointed in me. I have long struggled with people pleasing. But my “yes” to my family was that more important call. This is what I came to do. Not just to preach all over creation, but to be dad to my kids and husband to my wife. That is what I was called to do in that season of life.

And this is related to this next point, which is implied by Jesus’ actions. The next thing that will help us live wisely is start to enjoy the word, “No.”

When you are clear about what God is guiding you to do, it will create a “No” to the things others are calling you to do. Think about how Jesus’ “Yes” to moving on meant a big “No” to the people waiting to get healed at that house.

Recently, I have been reading about some writers and researchers who have been discovering a rise in not only homicide and suicide, but in “Yes-icide”. In part, “Yes-icide” is when your mind is saying “No”, but your lips are saying “Yes, I can do that.”

Listen to these authors: “Yes-icide, that self-sabotaging reflex to please rather than say the much harder word: *no*. We all do it. Almost everyone with a pulse is conflict-averse. We don’t want to let people down, deal with unhappy faces, look weak, risk being branded a slacker. We fear the judgment, the loss of popularity, repercussions real and imagined... we tell ourselves we’ll get it done, we’ll be heroes; it’ll all work out in

the end.” (Nancy Vonk and Janet Kestin FastCocreate.com)

Can anyone relate?

So in part, to live as Christ and to ruthlessly eliminate hurry from our lives, we need to become a person who is *comfortable* with seeing deep disappointment in the faces of people who want you to do more. It means being comfortable with the risk of looking weak or as a slacker—comfortable with the risk of being judged by others because of our “No”.

Remember not even Jesus, God in the flesh, said, “Yes” to every opportunity to do more or become more, etc. so its probably okay *if we don’t* either. “No” is just as good an answer as “yes”. It may be disappointing, but it is good. If we don’t live into what I’m saying here I guarantee we will eventually exceed our limitations and fry our souls.

And that leads me to share the next bit of wisdom: Know and embrace (unapologetically) your limits. Don’t be ashamed by them.

I know that sounds absolutely counter-intuitive to our American inclinations of maximize your potential, etc. But let me be clear, I’m not saying don’t try to maximize your potential. It’s always good to stretch ourselves to greater things if we can.

I’m just saying that if you ignore or despise or be ashamed of your God-given limitations, you will be a slave to busyness and satan will have a field day with you.

One author put it like this: “Having a limited capacity is *not* a flaw in our character.” (Alli Worthington)

Research tells us that one of the reasons things like burnout arises is that we keep trying to live too long, too often beyond our limits.

Let me visually demonstrate this to you (me juggling). Some folks can handle juggling one ball. Some can handle two and even three. Now let me try to juggle four (all the balls fall to the ground).

Notice that adding only one more thing caused *everything* to fall apart. It was not simply one ball got out of control, but everything became uncontrollable. Everything is affected by “just one more.”

And if you are a “one ball juggler” than enjoy that. Stop having “Juggle Envy.” Enjoy what you can do and rejoice that others can do what they do. You don’t have to feel bad or drive yourself sick to do more.

I have burned out in ministry several times over the past three decades and I did it while doing many good things in the world. But I did all those good things while doing a dumb thing. And that dumb thing was doing all those good things beyond my limits. And that caused a lot of damage to by body and soul.

When we add too much, many things will suffer. Most often it’s your health or your family or your spiritual vibrancy. So again know and embrace (unapologetically) your limits.

Similar to this is the fourth crucial thing I want to lay out for you: Know your Red Lines. Let me introduce you to what I call, “The Busyness Spectrum.” It goes from Inactive...Active... Busy...Hurried...Driven.

To be realistic there are seasons or situations when it is necessary for us to operate in most of these places. For example, if I buy you a ticket to Europe and you are late for the plane, you'd better be in hurry mode! So it is okay if we hit all these things once in a while.

If we are honest, we will likely see how most of us move in and out of each station in the course of a single day. So moving back and forth through the whole spectrum is not the problem.

The problem comes in the issues of frequency and duration. In other words, when we find ourselves *too frequently* crossing or living *too long* across what I call The Red Line, we will be in trouble.

The Red Line is that pace of life where you find that your soul is weakening, your health and relationships are suffering, and your joy is shrinking. Losing our joy should be a real big indicator that lets us know we are too long and too frequently past the Red Line.

As one Christian writer put it: "The Spirit of Joy and the Spirit of Hurry cannot live in the same house." (Evelyn Underhill) Does that resonate with you?

Do you know where *your* Red line is? What are the specific indicators that you are near or crossing it? For me it's when I'm *frequently* losing sleep. It's when I'm anxious *about spending time off* (yes that's true). Most people will look at their calendar and think, "Oh great. Next week I get a day off."

That's not me. I will actually look at the day off and get nervous because I think, "I can't take that day off. I got way too much to do."

Another personal sign that shows I'm hitting the Red Line is when my time or conversation with family or friends feels like a disruption to my life and work.

So we really need to be very clear about our Red Lines and Red Zones. If you can *define* it you can *defeat* it. But if you don't define exactly the markers for your Red Line, your pace of life will defeat you.

Let me be clear. I'm not simply talking about making more margins in your day. I'm not even talking about taking vacation. Studies show that four weeks after vacation people are back at the same exhaustion levels they were before their vacations.

What I'm talking about is much deeper. I'm talking about life reorientation. I'm talking about looking at our lives with a strenuous honesty about *why* we are really saying yes so often. Are we possibly saying "yes" because of people pleasing, or the fear of rejection, perfectionism, or what I call, over-functioning etc.?

By over-functioning I mean doing something for others what they should be doing for themselves. You need to realize people will always invite you to over-function.

This is a reality folks, if we *don't deal with* those deep soul things I don't care how many margins you put in your schedule they won't last. If I'm going to "ruthlessly eliminate hurry" in my life I need to ask my calendar and my soul the hard questions.

Why am I belaboring all this? Because of what suffers and gets lost when we live often in those red zones. Because of what

suffers relationally, soulfully and emotionally in the people around us.

When we are too long in the "Busy-Hurried-Driven" areas it usually means our family and important relationships and God get the "leftovers."

Does your family, friendships, and church community get "the leftovers" of your energy? The leftovers of your creativity? The leftovers of your conversation? Do they get the leftovers of your time and attention or your responsiveness, patience, and service, etc.?

I cannot begin to tell you how many couples and families suffer because people are giving each other the leftovers of the best they have to offer.

The last thing that will help us and is related to this Busyness Spectrum is learning to Embrace *Inactivity*.

I know that sounds odd, but hang with me a minute. How many of you, when you look at this spectrum, are thinking that Inactivity is the place where you *don't* want to be? But here's the thing: this is *exactly* where Jesus would go *often*.

Some of you may be thinking, "I have a teenager who has a PhD. in inactivity and it hasn't led to anything good." But I'm not talking about being *lazy*. I'm talking about being still, focused, reflective, and God-attentive.

Let's look at another scene, again, early on in Jesus' ministry. Jesus has just healed a leper and He tells the man to not tell anyone about the miracle. But look at what happens.

Luke 5:15-16 - ¹⁵ Yet the news about Jesus spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. ¹⁶ But Jesus often withdrew to deserted places and prayed.

Notice again there were a ton of folks (“crowds” – plural) seeking Jesus’ help. But as verse 16 points out, Jesus *often* withdrew in the face of these things.

Again, here is Jesus starting a new movement to save and heal the very people who are flocking to see Him, but instead of working like crazy to help them He frequently practices the soulful habit of withdrawing into solitude and prayer.

People for millennia have realized the value of silence and solitude. One ancient Christian mystic made this statement: “Silence is nothing less than the mother of the wisest thoughts.” (Diadochus). Can anyone really speak wisely without being in silence?

As a public speaker I know that if I’m to go forth and do something, than I need to go forth and do nothing first. I need to be still and silent and God-attentive.

Now I know most of you have been taught often about prayer and you know its importance in our daily lives. And since my time is running out let me just say a quick word about solitude.

Solitude in our culture is becoming a rather unique thing. However, as Jesus demonstrates solitude is a necessary and even vital component to the human condition because “crowds” are always present in our lives:

Crowds of needs, crowds of decisions, crowds of requests, crowds of demands, crowds of choices, opportunities, voices, agendas—crowds!!! They will always be a part of our life. So this is why we need to *regularly infuse* our lives with spiritual disciplines like solitude, silence, and prayer.

Let me finish our time by giving you a couple of very helpful hints as you consider to make silence and solitude a more regular part of your life.

One: Schedule it. Solitude will not volunteer to jump into your calendar. Try to write it in granite because it is often the first thing that gets sacrificed from our calendars when something comes up. As one person put it years ago, “If you don’t come apart *for* a while – you will come apart *in* a while.” (Vance Havner)

Two: Take small measures of solitude and silence. Start with 15 minutes in one day in the week. Then after a few weeks try 30 min, etc. My point is this, don’t try to become a Benedictine monk your first time out. You will get discouraged by your inevitable failure and not try it again.

In the past I sometimes did retreats for church leaders after I had taught them about silence and solitude. They almost always thought they could handle it. One time we had a four-hour retreat at a monastery in Waialua. After a half hour they kept checking their watches and would approach me and ask, “What time are we done?”

Three: Take time to merely sit in *complete silence* and slowly breathe. When we slow our breathing it slows down our

mind, which makes it easier for the soul to experience and be attentive to God’s Presence. It’s hard to be attentive to God with “monkey mind.” We can’t have our minds jumping all over the place and expect to hear from or be directed by God.

At the men’s retreat last year I had the guys take about 1.5 hours to have some solitude and silence. More than a few remarked how long it took to settle their minds. So, please use your body to help your soul.

Now I want to be honest it is not easy to be in silence and stillness too long. Some studies show most people can only handle about 15 seconds of complete silence. Think about it. How long can many of us handle the silence in our cars while driving just a few blocks before we reach for the radio?

So my advice to you is this: as the impulse to speak or read or to journal, etc. comes just stay still, stay silent, and breathe slowly. Wait on the Holy Spirit. Let *Him* lead you to read or meditate on scripture or journal or whatever. And it should go without saying that you should not have any digital stuff within 50 yards of you.

By the way, if you are a young family then let me encourage you to give each other the Gift of Solitude. My wife and I did this for years when our kids were small and it really helped.

So let me finish with this. Christ had a rhythm to His life. There was much action to His life, but there was *often* solitude. Spiritual health is not in choosing the solitude over action, but integrating one with the other.

Reality is that we need more than Sundays and Small Groups and vacations to keep us on track. Christ, Himself, needed more than visits to the synagogue and fellowship with the disciples to fulfill His mission. He needed, the God of the Universe needed, solitude. For Him it wasn't *bonus*, it was *basic* to live an impactful life. And that's what it needs to be for us.

If the Son of God felt it necessary to frequently be in solitude in order for His life and ministry to go well, it is probably safe to say we will need it too.

So again: Be clear about what God has given you to do. Learn to love the word "no." Know and embrace your limits. Know your Red lines. And take regularly scheduled time in silence, solitude, and prayer.

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Note: Sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by emailing: fpchkoolau@gmail.com