

*Stop, look, and listen...*

Recent weeks have for me been an important time to reflect on what is really important in life. The Lord has slowed me down on the inside, bringing me to an inward quietness. I realized I may not have really "stopped" on the inside for a long, long time.

*Have you?*

Some years ago I happened to be watching a baseball game on TV. During this game, the pitcher did something illegal. He "balked". As a result the batter was allowed to go to first base. For you who know less about baseball than I do, let me explain what that pitcher did, or rather, what he didn't do. He didn't come to a complete stop between pitches. That's what it means for a pitcher to "balk". Between every pitch, the pitcher must come to a complete stop in the motion of his body before he starts the next pitch. That pitcher didn't stop between pitches. He balked. As I watched that, the Holy Spirit spoke to me. He said, "My church does that all the time. They are always 'balking'. They refuse to stop between pitches."

I understood quite easily what the Lord was saying to me. Do you? Churches, especially leaders, are always "throwing pitches". These pitches represent the initiatives, the plans, the events, the ministries, the activities that are always being set into motion. It seems the Lord was saying to me that we keep making plans, starting things, initiating things one after the other, or many things together -- without ever stopping. Really stopping. Stopping to commune with God, wait on Him, and consult with Him before continuing.

The pitcher I was watching only did this once. Once out of perhaps a hundred pitches. How many times do we "balk"? How often do we stay in motion, just keeping "the game moving"? I would think, if a heavenly umpire had his say, we should all get thrown out of the game for our refusal to stop between our pitches!

There seems to be an inward pressure in our souls that takes on its own inertia, and we can find ourselves moving from one activity to another, just "keeping the game moving". Somebody should call "foul!" on us all, until we learn to stop INTERNALLY -- that is, to quiet our souls and minds before God; to re-enter that spiritual stillness where God's voice is always resident and waiting for us. It may only require a momentary stopping, a quiet spot in the middle of necessary business and activity. Or it may mean waiting on God for an extended time.

We are not called to avoid the burdens of life, but we must learn to pause in our heart and listen to God, even during a busy day. Jesus didn't spend His life running away from people or their needs. The call and compassion of God took Him right into the middle of crowds and their problems. But he knew how to stop, look, and listen....to His Father.

Luke 4:42 says, "*At daybreak Jesus went out to a solitary place*". Luke 5:16 says "*But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed*". Luke 6:12 says, "*One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God.*"

I was reminded recently that I am actually alive today because of a church being willing to pray all night 55 years ago! When in my mother's womb, my mother got

sick with toxemia, and her life was threatened by it. Finally she was in the hospital, and the decision was made to take my life the next morning, in order to save hers. At that time my parents dedicated me to the Lord, and to the ministry. That night their church went to prayer, all through the night. In the morning she was healed. And I was alive!

Must we not return to such a life as Christians, knowing how to separate ourselves even in the middle of life's cares, the burdens of ministry, or the crisis that may have come without welcome or warning?

There aren't many mountains to climb for a night of prayer here in Minnesota, but each of us can find a way and a place to get alone with God. Perhaps we must follow the example of Sarah Edwards, the wife of Jonathan Edwards, mother of many children. When she needed to stop, look and listen to the Lord, she would simply throw her apron over her head and pray, regardless of who was in the room. And everyone knew they better not interrupt her! It was her "instant prayer closet".

Psalms 23:2 says "He MAKES ME lie down beside quiet waters". Sheep aren't so smart. Sometimes the shepherd has to force them to lie down. Christians seem even dumber -- myself included, who ought to know better by now.

Our souls can operate on adrenaline rather than inspiration and guidance from God. Only God's presence and Word can separate between our enthusiasm and His divine energy. Only the grace found in face to face communion with Him can free us from the driving force of our sense of religious obligation, a force that can drive us right out of His perfect will.

Without a habit of "stopping between our pitches", without quieting down to hear His "still, small voice", we are destined for no more than second best. We can live life just outside the promised land, never crossing our Jordan river, never seeing the miraculous intervention of God that is our heritage, never coming into the anointed place that God has prepared for us.

Let this not be.

The "fringe benefits" of knowing how to stop internally and commune with God are many. Being made to lie down beside quiet waters has this result: "*He restores my soul.*" We are also kept from "burnout" by developing this internal habit, which we call "resting in the Lord", "waiting on God", and "practicing His presence".

Don't "balk".

Stop. Look. Listen... to Him.

John Matthews