

He chose twelve...that they might be with Him..
Mark 3:14

Your First Calling

John Matthews

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My parents spent the last years of their lives in a small community in central Minnesota. They became known in the area as people of prayer. The rumor was, if you had a problem, call Lew and Margaret. They'll pray. They get an answer! Like many elderly people, they thought they were no longer very useful, but I suspect those last years of giving themselves to prayer were the most fruitful years of their lives. Following my mother's transfer to heaven, I read through her extensive prayer diaries and saw that they had influence even on other nations!

I had some conversations with them about their daily hours together with the Lord, though they didn't talk about it much. It was evident that this had become the most important part of their life, yet they preferred to

keep it mostly private between them and the Lord. I thank God for them and other elderly believers who give themselves to prayer. I felt the loss of their prayer in my own life and ministry when they went to heaven. (They were my biggest fans and most faithful prayer partners!) I expect when we get to heaven we will find praying grandparents honored way above those we thought were important here on earth!

One day my father related to me a conversation he had with his new pastor in the local barbershop. They were talking about the Lord, and about prayer. As they both waited to get their hair cut, the pastor spoke of his habit of praying in the church sanctuary every day. He would walk among the pews, listen to the Lord, and pray for the people in his congregation. One morning a deacon walked in the sanctuary and inter-

rupted the pastor as he was praying. "Pastor, what are you doing?" The pastor replied, "I'm waiting on God and praying for the church.". The deacon replied, "We don't pay you for that! You do that on your own time!"

It would be a humorous story if it weren't so tragic. How could the deacon have been so far away from understanding God's ways, to think the pastor was wasting the church's money by waiting on God and praying for the church?

Some years ago I was reading a weekly bulletin from one of the largest evangelical churches in our city. Thousands of people attended the church, and the bulletin listed dozens of activities going on that week. There was not one prayer meeting listed. How could a large church be so busy yet so far removed from what saints of old knew to be the church's

greatest privilege and highest call?

Before we criticize the deacon or the churches, we better take a look at ourselves.

Some have stated the problem like this: we get so concerned with the work of the Lord that we have little time for the Lord of the work. The result is we are indeed busy, but not necessarily doing what's on His heart or obeying His voice. We may be doing lots of good things, but not seeing the fruit that Jesus promised to His disciples. We may be filled with worry and anxiety with few answers to prayer. The only solution is to spend time, precious time with God Himself.

To be honest, lack of time for prayer is rarely our real obstacle. The Lord spoke to me one day when I was pressed for time and decided to skip a session of communion with Him..

"John, what things DO you have time

for?" I pondered His question for a moment and realized I had a simple answer -- but I didn't want to admit it to Him. Finally I replied, "I have time, Lord, for two kinds of things. The things I WANT TO DO, and the things I HAVE TO DO. That's how I spend my time." "Well, there you have it," the Lord seemed to say. "Now you know exactly why you don't spend more time with Me. Either you don't WANT TO, or you don't HAVE TO. Either you find no pleasure in being with Me, or you think it is unnecessary. Time is not your problem. The problem is your heart." I was left speechless, and trapped by the truth.

It takes courage to turn away from the pressures and demands of life to wait on God. Turning away from sin is an obvious prerequisite for coming close to Him. For some, hidden sin may be the reason that they do not have fellowship with God. Praise

God that when we confess sin, He forgives us and cleanses us! Praise God for the wonderful blood of Jesus, which gives us boldness to enter His presence! For those who have dealt with sin, there can be an even greater challenge. It can mean turning from urgent needs, from good things that demand attention, and from the influences of well-meaning friends.

To pour out your soul to Him in love and worship... to sit at His feet and listen for His voice...to receive from Him...when the cares of life demand your attention – this may be the greatest challenge for a Christian. Is it worth taking the challenge? Winning this struggle for a life in His presence, a life of moment by moment communion with Him, will bring the greatest rewards this side of heaven!

"Why has this perfume

...been wasted?"

There is a story told in Mark 14 about a woman with an expensive alabaster jar of perfume, who broke it and poured it on Jesus' head. At the time, the Passover was just two days away (two days before His death). The chief priests and teachers of the law were trying to find a way to kill Him.

"While He was in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper, and reclining at the table, there came a woman with an alabaster vial of very costly perfume of pure nard; and she broke the vial and poured it over His head. But some were indignantly remarking to one another, "Why has this perfume been wasted? "For this perfume might have been sold for over three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor." And they were scolding her.

But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you bother her? She has done a good deed to Me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you wish you can do good to them; but you do not always have Me. She has done what she could; she has anointed My body beforehand for the burial. Truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her."

This is the only incident I know where Jesus said, "Wherever the gospel is preached... this shall be spoken of...". It must have been very significant to Him. What seems to make it even more significant is that it happened more than once!

In John 12 you will notice the story of a similar incident, one that happened four days earlier than the incident in Mark 14. John 12:1 says it occurred

six days before Passover. (not two, as in Mark 14:1.) It happened in the same town of Bethany, but in a different house. Instead of Simon's house, it occurred in the house where Lazarus, Mary and Martha lived.

"Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served while Lazarus was among those reclining at table with Him. Then Mary took a pint of pure nard..." Notice that in the Mark account it doesn't say it was Mary, but here in John 12 it was Mary. In a different house, on a different day this time.

"Mary took a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume, poured it on Jesus' feet, wiped His feet with her hair, and the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray Him, objected, why wasn't this perfume sold and the

money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages. He did not say this because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. Leave her alone, Jesus replied. It was intended she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You always have the poor among you but you don't always have Me."

In the Mark 14 account, when the woman poured out her vial of perfume on the head of Jesus, she met a surprising resistance. She had put herself in a vulnerable position. Who was in the house? Most likely the disciples of Jesus. Some of those present replied with indignation, "Why has this perfume been wasted?" It was probably His own followers who expressed this indignation!

(Did they know what was going on when this lady broke the jar and poured the perfume on His head? Well, they thought they knew.) They said, "This is a waste." Here was a bottle of perfume worth a whole year's wages. Put it's value into whatever your year's wages are: that is how much it was worth. Would you pour out a year of your income on Jesus? It brought an immediate response in the room. "Why was this perfume wasted, when it should have been sold and the money used for the poor?"

Let's say it was \$20,000 worth of perfume (income for a year). She spilled \$20,000! She could have sold that jar of perfume, got the \$20,000 and fed homeless people. If you were in India you could feed thousands of people with \$20,000. You could start a number of churches in Russia with \$20,000. In most third world coun-

tries you could support many pastors for a year on that amount. Perhaps there could be hundreds, maybe thousands of people brought to Jesus with an investment of \$20,000 from the one bottle of perfume which the lady brought, broke...and wasted.

Wasted...on WHO?

I always think that this question wasn't quite complete. Those who spoke left unsaid a couple of words. "Why has this perfume been wasted....?". The unsaid, but understood words were "...on Jesus". "Why was this perfume wasted ...on Jesus?" Isn't that what they were saying?

It was as if they were saying, "Think of all the poor people out there. All the things that need to happen, and here we are wasting \$20,000 of valuable perfume on Jesus. He doesn't need perfume. Why waste it on Him? Let's go out and do something good.

Why, this was a waste. Pouring out that perfume on Jesus was not right!" Yet Jesus, the lover of the poor, said, "Let her alone...she has done a good thing to Me...."

What was happening in that house? Jesus said she was anointing His body beforehand for burial, but perhaps only He was aware that it was a prophetic action. The woman was no doubt lavishly displaying her love and adoration for Jesus. She loved Him so much that she wanted to honor Him as best as she knew. (Anointing someone out of respect was common in her culture.) She no doubt gave the very best she had... to Him. It was pure worship. It was high honor to the One that had forgiven her or healed her.

Pure worship can only come out of a heart that loves the Lord and is not being coerced out of fear or guilt.

She could have thought, "I ought to worship the Lord. I have to go find something I can give." She probably wouldn't have come up with a \$20,000 perfume bottle if she had been motivated by anything but pure love for Him. She probably would have found something worth \$2.50 — because it was something she HAD to do. But when she poured out her worship, the atmosphere of overflowing adoration and honor for Jesus must have filled the house just like the fragrance of the perfume!. A spirit of self-righteous indignation immediately rose up in those around her. "What a waste! Get out there and do something good! There is so much out there to do! Why waste this wealth on Jesus?"

The John 12 account gives an insight into what was in the hearts of her critics. There you will see that in the other house, four days earlier, when

a similar thing happened, it wasn't several people who rose up with indignation. It was Judas who spoke those words. It wasn't that he was concerned about the poor. Actually, he liked to pilfer the money, for he was a thief.

The thief of your love life with Jesus...

If you are going to worship and honor the Lord, if you are going to take time to pour out your heart in love to Him, the voice of a thief and a deceiver is liable to stop you. And he will do it, not by leading you into outright sin, but by distracting you with the urgency of other good things. That deceptive voice will tell you that spending a lot of time in worship, devoting energy and attention on the Lord, is a waste of time.

A life of fellowship with God, of honor and worship to Jesus, does not come

cheap. It costs something—your best. The best of your time, your energy, and your attention. There is a price to pay to have a life of fellowship with God – all that you are, and all that you have or will ever have!

The voice of the betrayer and deceiver will rob you of living close to God. This voice comes mainly in your thoughts. This enemy is closer than you think. The voice of the thief and deceiver may not come in somebody else's flesh, but in your own flesh. As you kneel down to pray, the voice inside you says, "I don't have time for this". "I have too much work to do." As you attempt to meditate on the Word, or just sing to the Lord, the pressure of life – the tyranny of urgent matters – steals you away from God Himself.

Do you know how to "waste" the perfume of your time, honor and your

best attention — on Jesus? Have you learned to resist the voice of the deceiver, the voice of all the urgent things that keep you from taking time for love and admiration of Jesus Himself? If not, you are more loyal to other things and other people that you are loyal to Jesus.

Build a dam in your river of activity...

A few years ago I was meditating about a life of worship and prayer. I had a vision of a river and saw a dam being built in the river. The Lord asked me, "What is that dam for?" I thought about it and said, "Well, it stops the flow of the water". "What else is it for?", the Lord asked me. "Well, it raises up the level of the water and creates a reservoir behind it." "What else?", He asked. I guess I thought about it for some time before saying, "Well, when the water

is raised up it can go over the dam and it can create power." He said to me, "That dam is just like the habit of prayer. The river is the flow of the activity of your life. Prayer must interrupt the flow of your activity. By just rushing down the river of life, you will live "helter-skelter", without clear goals and direction from the Holy Spirit. Prayer interrupts the flow of your activity. Prayer is like that dam. It temporarily interrupts the flow of your busyness, and creates a reservoir of life within you. In prayer you come higher and nearer to Me, so that the flow of your activity will be on a higher plane, with more power."

We must find the courage to interrupt what is going on in our lives, even if it is good, and build a dam of worship and prayer. God wants to raise us up to a higher level of faith and hope, create a reservoir of His presence within us, and create a higher level of

spiritual power that can be harnessed for the work of His kingdom. The woman with the alabaster vial interrupted everything to pour her perfume on Jesus.

To honor the Lord is to pour on Jesus the best that we have, and with it comes a breaking. An alabaster vial was broken, so the perfume could come out. In our case, something has to break inside of us—mainly our pride and self-righteousness. All that we were, all that we are, all that we ever hope to be, must be laid at His feet. Then our worship can be released: a pure love for the Lord, a fragrant aroma to Him and to all those who get near us. Without such brokenness we will be doomed to a life of powerless religion, trying hard to stay busy doing good things, worn out by cares and anxieties but not enjoying fellowship with the Lord and having clear direction from Him. We

need a life humbly lived in the presence of the Lord Himself. We need to pour on Him—without embarrassment—our worship and honor, unconcerned about the reaction of those around us, and undistracted by the pressures of life around us. We need a life devoted to Jesus Himself.

Prayer Response:

“Lord, help us to follow the example of these ladies who loved You so much. They poured out perfume of great value to honor and worship you. Help us to ignore the voices within and from without that would keep us from living lives of worship and prayer. Help us to be as those alabaster vials of perfume, broken and poured out for You, Jesus. May our lives be a fragrance of honoring Your Presence that fills the air around us and draws others to come closer to You..”

Choose the good part...

The story of Mary and Martha, close friends of Jesus, illustrates a similar lesson.

“Now as they were traveling along, He entered a certain village; and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home. And she had a sister called Mary, who moreover was listening to the Lord’s word, seated at His feet. But Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up to Him, and said, “Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me.” But the Lord answered and said to her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only a few things are necessary, really only one, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her. ” Luke 10:38-42 New American Standard

“Mary”, Jesus said, had “chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her.” Mary knew when to stop working and sit at Jesus’ feet and listen to Him. Martha, on the other hand, needed to be exhorted. Jesus said to her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only a few things are necessary, really only one....”

Jesus was saying that God’s will could be described as “a few things necessary”. We all tend to become involved in too many things, sometimes out of need or pressure rather than the Lord’s direction. When I become over involved -- involved in more than a “few things”, I become bothered and worried like Martha. I can even begin to doubt His love for me like she did, wondering why He isn’t helping me.

The “really only one thing” that is necessary? It is to listen to Him and

do what He says.

“Don’t You care that she left me with all the work?”, Martha said to Jesus. “Tell her to help me...!” She seemed to rebuke the Lord and tried to tell Him what to do! Why didn’t she just whisper to Mary to come to the kitchen and help her? No, like us, she got irritated at the Lord and tried to “control” even Him! There’s a bit of Martha in us all, don’t you think?

She assumed that if He really loved her, He should get Mary to help her in the kitchen. When I get involved in things that are not born of His Spirit, I begin to feel like He’s not helping me out enough in all of my efforts to “do good deeds for Him”! I start thinking, “How come I’m left to do all this work by myself? Why doesn’t God do something about it?” This is a sign of being driven and burned out by self made efforts. It is a breeding

ground for resentment and criticism – even of the Lord Himself, even trying to tell Him what to do!

Mary wasn't lazy; she just knew when it was time to listen to Jesus instead of being distracted by all the urgent needs, and having no energy left to fellowship with Him. Mary showed her loyalty to Jesus by putting everything else out of her mind when He came to visit her home.

She knew He wanted her attention first, not her service.

Prayer Response:

“Lord help me to take the time to be with You. Help me to stop and listen to you. Help me to see the “few things that are necessary”, those things to which You have really called me. Lord, help me to see the “really only one thing necessary”—to sit at Your feet, hear Your Word, and live according to that Word. Lord, show

me how to "choose the good part..."

Keeping busy... or serving Him?

Are you staying busy or serving the Lord? They are not the same thing. Jesus said "I can do nothing on my own initiative. I can only do what I see the Father doing, and say what I hear Him saying." (See John 5) Why do you think that even Jesus needed early morning prayer, and sometimes all night with His Father? ...to see in the Spirit what the Father was doing and to hear what He was saying!

I find it easy to stay busy. Sometimes people give me the Minnesota trivial greeting question: "...Staying busy?" I think this question comes from the Scandinavian work ethic, which says if you're working and busy, then life is good and you're OK. I always respond to that question with "Oh yes, staying busy is easy. Being fruitful is not so easy."

So...are you just "staying busy"?

Actually I love to "stay busy". It's one of the idols I have had to dethrone in order to have a prayer life. My flesh likes to be busy all the time. My flesh is an enemy of God. My flesh hates for me to stop and listen to God!

I remember an extended time of waiting on God, when I was disciplining myself to spend long hours alone with Him. Much of that extended time was not pleasant. Not because God is unpleasant—NO! IN HIS PRESENCE THERE IS JOY FOREVERMORE! The problem was me. In the quietness of my prayer time I was facing anxieties, condemnation, and a sense of guilt and failure.

During that time of waiting on God I found I was closer to my unhealthy thought life than I was to the Holy Spirit. As a result, my hours of trying to be "alone with God" turned

into frustration. I didn't know how to silence my mind and cleanse my thoughts. I was mostly alone with myself and my worries instead of alone with God!

One day during this extended time of prayer I had a schedule of meetings and responsibilities that caused me to be on the run from 6 a.m. until midnight. It was an 18 hour day of busyness with people and projects non-stop. For me, it was fun. I loved it. I was, I hate to admit it, happy that I had no time to pray! I was "staying busy". It really didn't matter to me if I was being fruitful! I just loved being busy.

I recall an embarrassing incident after an evening service when I was pastoring a church. A lady came up to Jackie and said to her, "Oh I wish I had a husband like yours! I could just imagine him today spending hours

on his face before God worshipping and listening for His voice!" Though I was standing right beside them at the time, I didn't have the courage to tell the lady that in reality I was running around "like a chicken with it's head cut off" (Minnesota farmer humor) for the whole day like most everyone else in America that day. Overhearing the lady's idea about me was God's gracious way of telling me to change – lest he would have to rebuke me about this issue!

The point is this: unless we know how to stop, look, and listen for the Lord, so that we do **ONLY WHAT THE FATHER SHOWS US**, we are destined to a life of busyness without fruitfulness in the things that matter most. We may complain about the "tyranny of the urgent"; but the fact is, our flesh would rather keep busy with things and people than get alone with God.

Apply the Blood and the Word to your mind...

If you have never dethroned your idolatrous soul, which exalts the needs and pressures of life above the voice of God, it is time to do so. Confess your bad mental habits and repent from them. Apply the blood of Jesus to your mind and take your thoughts captive to His Word. This will stop the flood of urgent and anxious thought and allow you to recognize the refreshing presence of God. Stillness may not be a friend, because you have never learned to shut out the noisy voices that make you feel anxious or guilty when you try to quiet down on the inside.

The fact is that few of us really know God very well. We are afraid of being close to Him because we have a distorted view of Him. To some, He may seem a stern judge looking down

to pass sentence on us. To others He may seem an emotionally distant father who rarely shows interest in our lives. To another He is a very important person who only has time for other very important people – and we don't think we are!

When we have revelation of His Word in us, all that changes. We come to know God as He really is. We get rooted in the knowledge of His love, and that love draws us close to Him. He is our loving Father, who has made the way for us to come boldly into His throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. It is the new and living way, the way of the finished work of Jesus, that has made free and open access to Him possible and necessary. We approach Him, not as servants, but as sons and daughters. Though He is the King of the Universe, we His children have special access to His

presence at all times. The only protocol is to come as we are, cleansed by the precious blood of Christ. That is what turns our reluctance into courage to be in His presence. The blood and name of Jesus silences the voices of fear, condemnation and doubt that keep us avoiding that love relationship with Jesus.

I have been surprised at the quietness of my mind when the blood of Jesus has been applied to it, and I focus my thoughts on the Word of God. Instead of dozens of priorities and memories flooding my thoughts, my mind becomes like still water. In the blood washed hush, the Holy Spirit is welcomed. (The Spirit comes where the blood has been applied.) It is then that I recognize the Lord present and personal. It is then He speaks. It is then I am able to listen. It is then I can respond to Him, hearing and obeying Him. And it is from

this extended time in His presence that my life becomes fruitful, not just busy.

Don't worry workaholics! A life with God will not make you lazy. It will make you live like Jesus, whose days were VERY busy and VERY fruitful! Listening to God will not relieve you of your great love—working long and hard. Serving God is healthy and hard work, but you'll no longer be serving hidden idols in your heart which produce a lot of activity with no fruit. Instead, you will know His presence in what you are doing. You will begin to see what He is doing and hear His voice. The creativity of the Holy Spirit begins to work in you, giving you clear vision, inspired goals and divine plans. You will find yourself adjusting your life to be fruitful in His service!

So...once again: are you "staying busy" or serving the Lord HIMSELF?

It is not easy to stop acting like Martha, and to find the "good part" that Mary found at the feet of Jesus. There is something comforting in lots of tasks and activities. They can make us feel we have accomplished something worthwhile, like finishing "to do" lists. But was He central to our workday? Did we accomplish His goals?

To transform a Martha into a Mary takes a miracle of God's grace. To come to the place of listening to the Lord, letting Him say what He wants, and abiding in that word—that is a transformation of the inner man that only God can accomplish. It is not impossible for a person to change from a life of good works to a life lived in the abiding presence and grace of God. Everything within us

seems to resist it. But with God all things are possible. We can be among those who live "by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God."

His voice is the "still, small" one...

In 1 Kings 19, we find Elijah hiding in a cave on Mt. Horeb, discouraged and troubled after confronting Ahab and being threatened by Jezebel.

The Lord told Elijah to "go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD... And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice."

God seemed to be giving Elijah an "object lesson" on how to recognize His voice. This great man of God had become weary and disoriented. He needed a tangible reminder of God's character and nature. So God set up a demonstration of wind, earthquake and fire. Though the Lord probably made these things happen, they did not contain His presence: "...the Lord was not IN the wind...etc."

After all this tumult came the sound of a "still, small voice". When Elijah heard it, he came out of the cave. The wind and the earthquake and the fire had not drawn him out. Perhaps they had made him retreat even farther into the cave — after all, the wind was strong enough to break rocks! Regardless, what is important was that the Lord was not in these strong and compelling forces. Instead, He came in the still small voice. Other Bible translations

say "the sound of a gentle blowing" or "the sound of sheer silence" or "a gentle whisper". My own translation would be "a calm, small sound". This is how God speaks to us.

The "still, small voice" is God's chosen way of communication. His presence produces an atmosphere of inward tranquillity, and He comes as a "whisper within". His voice is calming, stabilizing, and quiet. The One who created the wind and the fire, and who can shake the heavens and the earth, chooses to speak to His children with a calm, small sound.

Life around us can be compelling and noisy. The good as well as the bad that may happen around us can have a strong pull. We can be tossed and turned in the turbulence of circumstances, our attention drawn away by the loudest voices around us – or the compulsive thoughts within. We may

say to ourselves "Look at the powerful anointing on that person! I should be doing the same thing!" Or, "Look at what Satan is doing over there! I should be doing something about it!" Or "Those people say they need help now!"

Are you being pulled by external forces rather than being led by the Lord Himself? Do you let the loudest voices guide your life and determine your existence? Or are you being ruled over by the gentle, almost noiseless voice of the Father? Colossians 3:15 says "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts..." The definition of peace is inward calm and tranquillity. It is a freedom from the distresses of sin, freedom bought by the blood of Jesus. Do you have a calm in the center of you, in which you can frequently find refuge from the pressures of life? Is there an inward tranquillity where you find communion with the Lord?

Life with God cannot be lived by simply responding to outward stimuli. Life in Christ is lived in the secret place, the abiding place. This is in our spirit rather than our mind and emotions. Our spirit is the place in us where His Spirit dwells, and where we cohabit and coexist with Him. From our spirit we can live in peace, for Jesus who is in us said "in Me you have peace".

When Elijah heard the still small voice, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out to the entrance of the cave. (When you finally hear that quiet calm voice of God, your will come out of your cave too!) The Lord said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah rehearsed with God his discouragement. The Lord encouraged him, gave Him new marching orders, and assured him that he was not alone. Through a fresh word, Elijah was renewed and prepared for

what was to come.

The true voice of the Lord brings refreshing, renewing, reviving, re-firing, and recommissioning for the next chapter in your life. Only He knows what is coming. He wants to give you new marching orders for the days ahead. Let Him finish his inward work in you, and let Him help you to be firmly anchored in His Word and His Presence—His still small voice. Determine to let the peace of Christ rule in your heart—and nothing else. No longer be swayed by influences around you, be they good or bad, be they friend or foe.

Perhaps you are like Elijah in that cave. Life's experiences may have left you feeling weary or discouraged. The increasing turmoil of the world may seem overwhelming. Even what God is doing through the lives of other people may leave you some-

what disoriented and wondering if you should be doing what they are doing.

Get alone with Him. Worship Him. Wait a little longer for Him to show Himself to you. Don't let the external pressures guide your life — especially the loud and compelling ones. Listen for the voice of your Shepherd. You are His sheep. You belong to Him, and He is the One who has laid down His life for you. Listen to Him. Jesus said of Himself, "He calls his own sheep by name, and leads them out. ..the sheep follow Him because they know His voice, and a stranger they simply will not follow..." Wait for the sound of the still, calm familiar voice of your Shepherd.

Be still...

There was a period of two years when Jackie and I seemed to live on just two verses from the Bible. God gave them to us in a season of persistent

trial, a time of clouded vision and unanswered questions. We simply had to trust in the goodness of God. One of these verses was Psalms 46:10: "Be still and know that I am God." We learned to be still, (or as the original Hebrew word for 'still' in this verse can be translated), "Let go, relax, go limp, stop striving..." It was a time to go limp in the strong and secure arms of our loving Father.

During this same season we had to learn another kind of stillness, the kind spoken of in Exodus 14:13. The Israelites were at the Red Sea with the Egyptian armies racing towards them. God's word to them was "Stand still and see the salvation of God...!" The Hebrew word for still in this verse is to "take your stand, stand by". It speaks of a military alertness, as a soldier at attention waiting for marching orders, alert and on guard, yet doing nothing without

a command. It spoke to us of our need to be at attention in our minds, not giving in to the enemy's desire to defeat us. We learned to "take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" and not fall into worry, despair or unbelief.

We learned two kinds of stillness. One is to go limp in the arms of God, totally relaxing in His faithfulness. The other is to stand on guard against Satan and do nothing without God's orders. Our flesh causes us to respond opposite to this. Our natural souls tend to go limp in the face of the enemy, and be on guard against God! (due to spiritual passivity and unbelief). God changes us, sometimes during the worst seasons of life, so that we will trust Him completely. He gives us inner stillness in His loving presence. We learn to stop giving in to the lies of the devil, to put a guard on our thinking, and wait for

His direction.

When trouble increases or the pace of life quickens, our tendency is to speed up on the inside – usually out of fear and urgency. The actual need is to slow down internally, to stop. That doesn't mean that we "check out" and become irresponsible, or stop making good decisions when necessary. It means that we stop to listen for the still voice of God. The wisdom of the Lord comes from the Holy Spirit in us, and we need to connect with the quietness of His presence. As the Lord showed Elijah in the cave, His presence is not in the fire or the wind or the earthquake (sometimes apt descriptions of our circumstance) but in the "quiet, calm sound."

We need inward stillness even in the busyness of life, and especially when crisis comes. If we respond to the loudest "voices" in and around us, we

may miss the Lord's wisdom. Even taking a moment to connect with the stillness of God within can be enough to recognize His leading. By nurturing a stillness of heart and mind, the fresh flow of the "peace that passes all understanding" will come. In that place we can receive from Him all that we need.

A little song says it: "He is all I need, all I need; Jesus is all I need." "I take Him now, I take Him now, for all that I need."

Quietness, waiting and patience are habits of power and strength, not weakness. It is the calm person in the crisis that others lean on, and the one who can make good decisions. The effect of the Holy Spirit in us is to increase this ability to stay calm. God is not anxious and worried about our problems. In His quietness and confidence we find our strength.

Don't "balk"...

Some years ago I was watching a baseball game on TV. During the game, the pitcher disobeyed the rules of the game. 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 the 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, the Holy Spirit spoke to me. He said, "My people do 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? People, 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. 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. He was disqualified. How many times do we "balk"? How often do we stay in motion, just keeping "the game moving"? I would think, if the Heavenly Umpire had His say, we should all get thrown out of the game for our refusal to stop be-

tween our pitches!

There is an inward pressure in our soul life that has its own inertia, and we can find ourselves moving from one activity to another, just "keeping the game moving". Voices, deadlines, commitments and urgencies may rule our lives. 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 resident and waiting for us. It may only require a momentary stopping, a quiet spot in the middle of necessary business. Or it may require waiting on God for an extended time without normal activities. Is it time to cancel or postpone things, or to have courage to say "no"? Or is it time to find courage to say "yes!" to what the Lord has already told you -- and from which you have been running?

These inward pressures are usually sin, but not the obvious kind. They are pressures of fear – fear of failure, fear of disaster, fear of what others may think, or fear of financial loss. There may be other unconfessed sin that we don't want to face, so we don't want to quiet down lest we be reminded. Or, instead of real sin, the enemy may accuse us of failure or worthlessness, feelings we try to avoid by "staying busy". Quieting down inside requires getting our heart clean and it means learning to live in the armor of God. (Ephesians 6:10-18)

We are not called to avoid the burdens of life, but we must learn to pause and listen to the Holy Spirit, 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 prob-

lems. 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." If Jesus the Lord needed this, so do we!

I am alive today because there was a church willing to go without sleep and pray for an entire night. My mother's life was threatened by toxemia of pregnancy when I was in her womb. 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 cried out for healing, and dedicated me to the Lord and the work of the Lord. (I believe I am a minister of the gospel today because of that dedication while in the womb.) Their church

had a men's ministry called "Fishers of Men". That night those men and their wives went to prayer for us and prayed all through the night. In the morning she was healed and I was still alive! Praise the Lord!

We all must find a way of knowing how to separate ourselves to be in God's presence -- even in the middle of life's cares, the burdens of ministry, or the crisis that might come without welcome or warning.

Jesus went up a mountain to pray all night. There may not be an actual mountain you to climb for a night of prayer, but each of us can find a way and a place to get alone with God. Perhaps we might follow the example of Sarah Edwards, the wife of the great preacher Jonathan Edwards, and mother of seventeen 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".

"He MAKES me lie down"

Psalms 23 says "He makes me lie down in green pastures." For many years it seemed to me that this verse would make more sense if it said "He LETS me lie down..." As I pictured the pastoral scene of Psalms 23, the shepherd leading the sheep to the green pasture and still water, it seemed to me that the sheep would naturally lie down when given the chance. Evidently sheep do not always know what they need. Often we don't know what we need.

Why would the shepherd need to MAKE the sheep lie down? Perhaps they can't easily relax, and are afraid of predators and unknown dangers.

Spiritual sheep are not much wiser. It takes the hand of the Good Shepherd, sometimes forcibly, to get us to lie down. We don't seem to have the innate knowledge of how and when to rest. Many of us need to be told to lie down. We may not even know we are in a green pasture, with our minds full of imagined and unknown dangers. We are prone to ceaseless activity, and do not provide a quiet spot for resting in God. Unless we know how to become still inside (how to cease our inward striving and struggling) we are not ready to move on to the paths of righteousness that the Lord has for us. (Remember about building the prayer dam in the rushing river of your life?)

The first lesson of the Christian life is to rest. The first leading of the Good Shepherd is to take us to green pastures and get us to lie down. There, beside quiet waters, He restores our

soul. The beautiful thing is this: He repeatedly brings us back to those green pastures and quiet waters. It is an ongoing work of God to establish quietness in our spirit and mind, to produce that peace that passes understanding. In that place (of feeding on His Word and His Spirit) He restores and refreshes. In that place He speaks, and He leads. Those green pastures are in His presence. There we find the still water. There He restores our soul, there we receive the power to follow Him where ever He goes.

God's way is: first rest; then do His work.

In order to work with God, we must be delivered from relying on human effort. This goes against our natural makeup, for we love to "get the work done", and take pride in our own accomplishments. It seems only right

to rest after all our work is done. Get the job done – then relax. Under the old covenant, the seventh day was the Sabbath. Six days were for labor, the seventh day for rest. When the work week was over, then came the rest.

Under the new Covenant the order is reversed. We are called to rest from our works first, and then let God do His work through us. Relax in your salvation first, then get the job done that God is calling you to do! Jesus pointed to this new way in Matthew 11:28-30: “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls.”

In Hebrews, God calls this new way of life a “Sabbath rest”, a fulfillment of the Old Testament Sabbath, when

His people were to do no work at all. Now our whole life is to be a "Sabbath rest" from our own works, so that we can let Jesus live His life through us. "There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His." Hebrews 4:9,10 Jesus lived in this Sabbath while on the earth. He did not do His own work, but let the Father work through Him. We can live the same way!

God created man on the sixth day of Creation. (Genesis 6:24-31) Therefore, man's first day of life was the seventh, the Sabbath, God's day of rest. We are called to rest first. Our work comes out of that rest. This is why, after the resurrection of Christ, believers began to worship on the first day of the week, instead of the seventh. Under the old covenant, the Sabbath was the seventh day. Now,

under the new covenant, our work week should begin with our rest in God. First rest, then work. First take your seat with Jesus in the heavenlies. First quiet down and hear from God. First be refreshed in His presence. First receive the love of the Father. First receive his forgiveness and His cleansing and His joy. First hear His direction and His wisdom; get hold of His goals and His dreams. Then do what He says. If we heed our first calling first, then our lives will bear the fruit of God working through us.

Sit, Walk, Stand...

This is the title of a little book by Watchman Nee, the great Chinese Bible teacher. It was written about the book of Ephesians, and is the most fitting title that could ever be used for the three great themes of this book. "Seated with Jesus in heavenly places", "Walk in a manner worthy of your

calling”, and “Stand firm against the schemes of the devil”. Many Christians are trying to stand against the devil before they have learned to take their seat with Jesus in the heavenlies, said Watchman Nee. I have found it to be so. It is common to go right to chapter 6 – the verses that teach us to put on the armor and “stand firm” in the battle against the evil powers in heavenly places. But this passage on warfare begins with the word “finally” (Eph. 6:10). Finally means “lastly”, or “in conclusion”. It’s not the starting place!

God’s first lesson of spiritual war is to rest. Too many Christians are attempting to go to battle for spiritual victories without knowing their position of rest in Christ. As a result, it is easy for the enemy to trick them, deceiving them into fighting battles that are already won. So much of what Christians call spiritual warfare is be-

ing confused and accused by Satan. They need to be rooted in the Word: who they are in Christ and what was accomplished in His death and resurrection. Just before Jesus died, He said "It is finished!" Do you know what was finished? Because of what He completed, you have a resting place in Him. This is your seat in the heavens with Christ. This is the place from which you can win the battles!

The great message of your "sitting place" is in Ephesians 1,2 and 3. Jesus has been raised up from the dead, ascended to heaven, and He "sat down at the right hand of God", until all His enemies become a footstool for His feet. Jesus is at rest. This is wonderful in itself, but more than that took place. In Christ, we who were dead were made alive with Him and raised up with Him and seated with Him in the heavenly places!

When a Christian finds His seat with Jesus, he is ready for the second great lesson. Ephesians 4:1 says, "Therefore walk in a manner worthy of your calling..." (Many translations use the word "live" in place of "walk" since it is speaking of practical daily living.) Those who have found their rest in Christ can learn to walk -- walk in humility, walk in love, and walk in the light. And then they are ready for the third lesson: to stand firm against the enemy of their souls, and live in the armor of God. First things first!

A little humility will help...

This place of sitting with Jesus in the heavenlies is foreshadowed in a tiny chapter, Psalms 131. It is another Scripture that calls us to an inward quietness in the middle of life's difficulties.

*"My heart is not proud, O LORD,
my eyes are not haughty;
I do not concern myself with great
matters
or things too wonderful for me.
But I have stilled and quieted my
soul;
like a weaned child with its mother,
like a weaned child is my soul within
me. "*

Sometimes life seems too difficult. Sometimes problems are too big to understand or solve. Sometimes the harder we try to reason our way through to a solution, the more frustrated we get, the more anxious we become. Accomplishing nothing, we end up in a panic or a pout.

Much of this problem comes from our natural tendencies. Our mind is quite proud, actually. We have an

inclination to think we are the center of the universe. "If I think it, it must be true. If I feel it, it is a fact. If it is in my head, it must be right." In fact, for many of us, to admit that a thought in our head is not the truth is a very difficult thing to do. For some, it is impossible, and is at the root of some mental illness.

Humility of mind is the first step toward faith. To be able to humble our thought life, and admit that we cannot figure something out, is a sign of spiritual progress. To admit we don't have the answers, that we can be wrong, and be able to stop reasoning and compulsively thinking, is a great step forward! To admit that God does have the answers, that what He says is true, takes some humility. When we humble our minds to acknowledge God is all truth, it's a sign of spiritual growth. Once we have repented of a proud mind, only a

little faith is needed for a victory!

Humility helps us understand that we can't handle the "great matters, things too difficult" for us. To quiet our mind down, to lean on God like a child leans against its mother, and let Him handle the things too big for us – something good is bound to happen, because God is so good!

So often, a problem sorts itself out if we can leave it alone for a while, not think about it, but simply rest in the Lord until He brings the solution. The solution is not in our ability to reason, but God's ability to help us. The mind that is not haughty or proud is one that can stay at peace when life becomes difficult.

I have learned at times to say, "...unsolvable problem, I bid you goodbye for a while. I cannot solve you or understand you. I am going to lay you at the feet of God, and I am going

to find comfort in His faithfulness to bring the answer. I will find my rest in Him."

Your first calling...

Your first calling as a Christian is not to serve the Lord. Your first calling is to sit at His feet and learn from Him, like Mary who Jesus said had "chosen the good part". In Mark 3 there is the account of Jesus calling the twelve to become His disciples and His apostles. This scripture could be called the commissioning of twelve men into their ministry.

"And He went up to the mountain and summoned those whom He Himself wanted, and they came to Him. And He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him, and that He might send them out to preach, and to have authority to cast out the demons." Mark 3:13-15

I used to see this as the commission of Jesus to his apostles to send them out to preach. Then I saw that preaching was not their first call and commission. The first commission of the apostles was "that they might be with Him". Whatever your call, whatever your job, whatever your ministry, your first call is not to that job or that ministry. Your first call is TO BE WITH JESUS. Everything else that you do comes from that first priority. It was said of the apostles in the book of Acts that others "took note of them that they had been with Jesus" Acts 4:13. Does anyone take note of you that you have been with Jesus?

The church at Ephesus had "left her first love" (Revelation 2:4). It doesn't say that she "lost" her first love, as is sometimes preached. She left her first love. The Lord Himself is your first love. You don't lose Him, you leave Him. Jesus was totally loyal to

the will and desire of His Father. You are to live the same way. Because Jesus was devoted to the Father, spending time with His Father was a first priority for Him and complete obedience was His goal, even to death. Return to your first love, the Lord Himself. To be with Him is your first calling.

At the wedding in Cana, where Jesus did His first miracle of turning water into wine, His mother Mary gave a simple and profound instruction to the servants: "His mother said to the servants, "Whatever He says to you, DO IT." (Mary said it first – not the NIKE shoe company! JUST DO IT!) If we would just heed those words, we too would see His miracles!

Why not start listening to Him more closely? Why not start building that dam of a prayer in your river of life? How about pouring out on Jesus some

of your valuable time and energy instead of giving Him the leftovers of your life? Haven't you lived long enough with your cares and your aimlessness? The enemy has robbed you of your highest privilege long enough – to live in the presence of God. God has a great future for you that only He can accomplish through you. Spend your life as close as you can to Him and He will do it!

Jesus has chosen you just like He chose the twelve. He has chosen you...first of all...to be with Him...