

# FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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**SERMON: *Loving God...With Less?***

**SERIES: *Pathways***

**SCRIPTURES: *Mark 1:9-35; Psalm 46:10; Matthew 6:24***

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*\*Credit to Bible Gateway; Gary Thomas,*

Well good morning and welcome to Five Forks Church.

We are on this journey together this year...seeking fuller maturity in Christ, that comes from a passage in Colossians 1. As I've been thinking about this concept another one of Paul's statements comes to mind, in [\*\*Philippians 3 - 8\*\*](#) **What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.**

Growing in maturing is about coming to know Jesus, intimately, personally.

And so in our first sermon series of the year (**SERIES GRAPHIC**), we've been following along with Gary Thomas in his great book "Sacred Pathways", where he talks about 9 different ways that we can come to know Jesus, that are described in Scripture.

In the first week, we spent some time talking about the **naturalist pathway**. Some people connect best with God, outdoors. If that's you, you need to find ways this year to be intentionally outdoors and intentionally aware of God's presence outdoors with you.

Last week we looked at the **sensory pathway**. Probably not as common for many of us as the naturalist pathway. But some people connect and learn best through sensory experiences...sound, smell, taste, touch, sight! I think we have to be a little bit more creative with practicing the sensate pathway. But the opportunities to know God and learn about God through our senses are there.

Today, we want to take a few minutes to talk about the third pathway; perhaps another word you may not be familiar with. And that's ok. You don't need to know or remember the word, just the concept. The pathway for today is...

### **I. The Ascetic Pathway**

Simply put the ascetic pathway means connecting with God through **solitude and simplicity**.

The idea here is that you and I, are finite creatures. We have certain limitations. With our physical bodies, with our time, with our resources. The ascetic pathway teaches us to make space in our lives for God. It's not about depriving ourselves...rather it's about setting aside certain things to make room for something more valuable.

You should also be aware, that this pathway perhaps more than any of the others goes against the grain of our modern North American culture and our craving for more...more stuff, more money, more attention, more noise, more activities in our lives.

There was an experiment done with mice a number of years ago. A researcher found that it takes a high dose of amphetamines to kill a mouse living in solitude. But a group of mice will start hopping around and hyping each other up so much that a dose 20 times smaller will be lethal. Such is the impact of the mouse's community.

In fact, a mouse that had been given no amphetamines at all, placed in a group on the drug, will get so hopped up that in 10 mins or so, it will be dead.

And we might guess that only a mouse would be so foolish as to hang out with a bunch of other mice that were so hopped up, going at such a frantic pace in such mindless activity for no discernable purpose, that they would put their own well-being and even lives at risk. It would be wrong to think so. (John Ortberg)

I was thinking about this, when was the last time you saw an advertisement on television that said, “Well we’d really like you to buy our product, but you can live without this. You can be happy without it. This might not be for you. It’s not gonna make you any more content than what you already are.”

The ascetic pathway challenges our “more is always better mentality” with the view that sometimes “less is more”. In order to connect with God, we actually need less in our lives. Less stuff, less noise, less activity...

*“Today a number of historical circumstances are blindly flowing together and accidentally conspiring to produce a climate within which it is difficult not just to think about God or to pray but simply to have an interior depth whatsoever...”*

*We, for every kind of reason, good and bad, are distracting ourselves into spiritual oblivion. It is not that we have anything against God, depth and spirit, we would like these, it is just that we are habitually too preoccupied to have any of these show up on our radar screens. **We are more busy than bad, more distracted than nonspiritual, and more interested in the movie theater, the sports stadium, and the shopping mall and the fantasy life they produce in us than we are in church. Pathological busyness, distraction, and restlessness are major blocks today within our spiritual lives.*** (Ronald Rolheiser; Comer 25)

And just real quick often when we hear this word, ascetic, it is in reference to the monastic movement or monks. You can breathe a sigh of relief we are not going to be advocating for monasticism here at Five Forks. And I acknowledge that we are all different and so the level at which we incorporate solitude and simplicity may look different, but perhaps more than some of the other pathways this is one we all need to wrestle with. I do think there is something incredibly valuable about the ascetic approach that can help us as we seek fuller maturity in Christ. Most of us have so filled up our lives, that one of the primary reasons we are not growing in fuller maturity in Christ, is because we don't have room. And that for some of us the first step on the journey to maturity in 2023 might mean to put some things down, set some things aside.

Let's take a closer look at

### **A. The ascetic pathway in Scripture.**

You might be surprised to learn that solitude and simplicity were a regular part of Jesus life.

#### **1. Solitude**

We often hear and tell the stories about Jesus miracles and his interactions with other people. And it causes us to miss the regularity with which Jesus was going off on his own.

Now for those of you who've been a part of Five Forks, you should know this because we talked about this in a sermon series a few years ago. What is the Greek word associated with solitude?...well I'm glad to see that we are all learning and retaining so much from the sermons. The word is **"Eremos"**. Everybody say that out loud with me...that's for all of our auditory sensate learners out there and hopefully you'll remember it better this next time around. Let me just refresh our minds on this. It's

often translated as “**desert or wilderness**” in your Bible, but it also means “**solitary place or lonely place or quiet place.**” This word shows up over 30 times just in the Gospels alone and most of those are in reference to Jesus.

If you have a Bible turn with me to Mark 1. And start in verse 9 with me, just kind of skim over the storyline, for a moment. Jesus is beginning his time of ministry. So he goes to John the Baptist to get baptized. After his baptism what does he do?

**Mark 1:12 - <sup>12</sup> At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness...**

Heads straight for the eremos. And this is not just an overnight trip. Look at the next verse (13)... <sup>13</sup> **and he was in the wilderness forty days...**

Jesus, the Messiah, God in human flesh...begins the most grueling stretch of his life, 3 years of ministry and then his crucifixion, death, resurrection, by preparing for 40 days in solitude.

Now keep reading, this is not an isolated incident. After 40 days of solitude, he returns to begin his ministry...calls his disciples and (verse 21) then heads for Capernaum. Arrives in Capernaum on the Sabbath. And heads straight for the Synagogue and Jesus begins teaching (remember he’s a rabbi!). We don’t know how long he preaches for. But he has busy morning.

When he finishes teaching we are told, “**just then**” (v.23) a man with an evil spirit confronts him. He takes care of the evil spirit. Then “**as soon as they left**” (v.29) they headed for Simon and Andrews house. Turns out Simon’s mother-in-law is ill. He goes there to spend some time with the family and heal her. And then (v.32) **that evening after Sunset, many came and they brought the sick, the demon-possessed.**

Suffice it to say it was a pretty full day for the Messiah. So what does Jesus do next?

Verse 35...

**Very early in the morning while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.**

Jesus knew that in order to reconnect with God, to keep his central focus on God and God's will...he had to remove the hustle and bustle, the distractions of life.

Henri Nouwen wrote, "In solitude, I get rid of my scaffolding. Scaffolding is the all of the stuff we use to keep ourselves propped up, to convince ourselves that we are important or ok. In solitude we have no friends to talk with, no phone calls or meetings, no television sets, no music or books or newspapers to occupy and distract the mind...Neither accomplishments nor resume's nor possessions nor networks would define me – just me and my sinfulness and my desire or lack of desire of God."

I think sometimes when we think about Jesus, we immediately think...well he was the Son of God, he had special super-human-powers that we don't have to live the life He lived and in the process we disregard his humanity. Jesus practiced solitude in order to refuel and re-center himself and connect with God.

And notice this, it wasn't that Jesus didn't have anything to do. It's not that he didn't have a full-time job. There were people to heal, sermons to preach, people to feed, crowds following...He was the Messiah. Ever feel like you're just being pulled in all directions by life? And because you are limited, your life is jam packed full. But in order to be able to give the best he had. Jesus knew he had to be fully rested and filled up. He needed connected to God.

The Psalmist knew this was true when he wrote (Psalm 46): **Be still, and know that I am God.**

In the stillness, in the solitude and the quiet, in the eremos...I come to know God.

Basil Pennington, an author and I'd call him a modern day monk, uses the metaphor of a pond (**PIC of pond with ripples**) to describe the importance of stillness in connecting with God. When you throw a stone into a pond, the stone will create ripples that reach to the shore all the way around...but only if the pond is still. When the pond is quiet and still, the arrival of the stone can be read over the entire surface. But when the pond is not still, when the surface of the water is already ruffled...the arrival of the stone will go undetected.

When your life is so jam packed full...don't be surprised if God's presence goes undetected.

For many of us we do not grow in maturity Christ because we are never stilled. **Our minds are disturbed by the commotion and noise of our disordered lives and thoughts: I don't have time to immerse my mind in the Bible. I don't have time for deep, meaningful conversations with God. I don't have time to examine the condition of my character. I don't have time for discipling relationships in my life. I don't have time to serve and participate in the life of the church.**

Henri Nouwen goes on to say, ***“Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life...We do not take the spiritual life seriously if we do not set aside some time to be with God and listen to him.”***

In our world today we have got to be deliberate about making time for solitude. There's sort of this legendary story about Susanna Wesley (**PIC OF SUSANNA**), mother of John & Charles Wesley...both impactful leaders in the Methodist movement but also heavily influenced the Brethren in Christ. Preachers and hymn writers. Susanna Wesley was their mother, they actually had a very large family, 19 children. I'll let that sink in for a moment. Not all of them survived, but a big family. Easy to become overwhelmed by noise and chaos in such a home. So, legend has it,

she started this practice where she would pull her apron up over her head and over time her kids learned that when mommy did this, it was best to leave her alone for a while. It was her way of intentionally and ruthlessly practicing solitude. I shared this story with Jenny, the next day she came home with a bundle of 10 aprons she had picked up at the store.

Solitude is about eliminating noise and commotion in order to connect with God. Some of us need to eliminate the noise and distractions and schedule disciplined and consistent times of solitude into our schedules.

The other part of the ascetic pathway is...

## 2. Simplicity

Simplicity is along the same lines. Solitude is about eliminating noise, distractions, sometimes people. That sounds bad...I don't mean you should actually eliminate other people.

Simplicity is a very similar idea related to setting aside stuff, material possessions or eliminating activities in your schedule in order to make room for connecting with God.

The French sociologist, Jean Baudrillard has made the point that in the Western world, **consumerism has become the new dominant system of meaning**. He argues, **atheism hasn't replaced cultural Christianity, shopping has**. (Comer 179)

So many of us have filled our hands with stuff...we don't have room for God. Buying stuff, accumulating stuff and then organizing our stuff becomes the focus of our lives. It turns out, Jesus had a lot to say about consumerism, possessions, money...and how it relates to spiritual maturity.



I'm just gonna warn you're probably not gonna like a lot of what Jesus has to say about this. But hold on to your seats...just gonna roll through some of this...statements Jesus made and you just take it in, soak it up...and listen for what Jesus might be asking of you...Jesus said...

**“Therefore Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink or about your body what you will wear...is not life more than food and the body more than clothes.”**

**“You cannot serve two masters. You cannot serve both God and money.”**

**“Do no store up for yourselves treasure on earth...”**

**A certain rich man came to Jesus and said, “What must I do to inherit eternal life.” And Jesus said... “Go sell all you have and come follow me.” The rich man turned and walked away sadly.**

**“Watch out. Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”**

**“It easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”**

Now, you think about that last statement it can be a little bit uncomfortable considering most of us fall in the 10% of “richest” people on earth. Maybe Jesus didn't really mean what he said, right? So I'm gonna give you a second chance to redeem yourselves this morning. We've talk about this word as well a couple of years ago...what is the Greek word for rich? We are just failing miserable this morning aren't we? The word is **“plousin”**...and do you know what rich means in the original language...yep...RICH! There's no explaining it away.

Jesus was just really practical about accumulation of stuff and how it effects our spiritual maturity. He was saying, sometimes the allure of materialism becomes so strong, we can begin to build our lives around it and in the process we don't have room to connect with God.

Now, one of the things I want you to notice is that Jesus is not legalistic about this. He doesn't say how big your television can be or that you shouldn't own 8 pairs of shoes or an expensive car. If he'd have known about Maurice's, that women's clothing store up in Chambersburg, he probably would have forbidden that...I've talked to Jenny about this...I'm just kidding. He's doesn't give specific rules about consumerism, wealth and possessions.

Jesus does not call money or wealth or material possessions evil. Jesus did not ask everyone he met to sell everything they own. God intends that we have adequate material provision and that this will look different for all of us. Simplicity is not about forced poverty... simplicity isn't mostly about "having nothing", it's about choosing to have less so that we have room for God.

Richard Foster (pg. 85) **"The majority of Christians have never wrestled with the problem of simplicity, conveniently ignoring Jesus' many words on the subject. The reason is simple: this Discipline directly challenges our vested interests in an affluent life-style."**

The ascetic pathway, as described in Scripture, encourages all of us to evaluate how much stuff and how many activities in our lives.

So this week you're going to learn a very spiritual word related to the practice of simplicity in your life. The word is: **NO**. One of the ways that we can learn to practice simplicity is being very thoughtful about how we use this word. John Ortberg talks about this. He says: *There was a time probably in your life when you used this word impactfully and with great joy. Like when you were two years old. (Eat your veggies. No. Clean your room. No. Brush your teeth. No.)*

*But over time you began to discover that people like you more if you say yes, rather than no. And this is for all of you people-pleasers and work-a-holics out there. Your life has become ruled by yes. I can do everything. Be everything. Buy everything.*

*Yes to bosses. Yes to schedules. Yes to meetings. Yes to products and buying things we don't really need. And we have "yessed" our way into spiritual oblivion. Our lives are crammed full. Decent. Respectable. Exhausting. Fatiguing. And the midst of all of this, we wonder why aren't growing in fuller maturity in Christ.*

Too many of us just saying yes to too much stuff and too many activities and not making space for God in our lives.

Author Shauna Neiquist says, "If you, like me, have said too many yeses, and found that all that hopeful, exciting, wide-open intention has actually left you scraped and empty the word that can change everything is 'no.' I know. I don't like it either. 'Yes' is fun and sparkly and printed on tote bags. 'No?' What if you saw someone wearing a sweatshirt that just said 'no'? I don't want to sit next to that bundle of fun. **But 'no', became the scalpel I wielded as I remade my life.**"

As with everything, we use this scalpel thoughtfully and prayerfully. We don't flippantly run around just saying no to everything. But done with care and consideration. No can be that word that can be at the beginning of creating space for God and the first step on your journey to spiritual maturity.

This week, what do you need to say no to?

The ascetic pathway is learning to practice solitude and simplicity...in order to make room in our limited existence to connect with God and grow in fuller maturity.

Ok, before we talk about the take-home flyer. Let me just mention...

## **B. Two Cautions for Ascetics**

Remember, that with each of the pathways, they can be taken too far or there are some dangers we need to be aware of. The first one is...

**Isolationism** – In seeking out solitude and simplicity...eliminating distractions from life...like noise and busy schedules...one of the dangers of the ascetic pathway is that we totally isolate ourselves from people and involvement in the world around us.

Some ascetic groups have so secluded themselves from the world or others...that they completely avoid the world and have lost touch with the world. They have nothing valuable to give back to the world, they aren't serving, they aren't involved in church life at all or community life at all.

It's always important to keep in mind, especially as we look at the life of Jesus, Jesus always found his way back into the lives of people. He spent significant time in the world, with the world. He called us to be salt & light in the world. It's hard to do that, if you seclude yourself from the world.

And this leads to the second caution for the ascetic pathway and that is...

**Judgementalism** – Ascetics can tend to look at their “counter-cultural” simple lifestyle as superior to others. “We aren't worldly. We've given up worldly comforts for Jesus.” Overly critical and suspicious of “the world” and can at times look down or judge others. That's why it's important to remember...

We are all different. Different backgrounds and opportunities. Convicted differently. Simplicity may look different for various persons. We don't compare ourselves to others. We don't expect the world to live as followers of Jesus. Jesus was pretty clear on this as well... Jesus said... **“Do not judge.”** In other words, worry about yourself.

That's the warning this morning for ascetics.

Ok so this week, the invitation is...

### **C. An invitation to solitude and simplicity.**

Again, I have the flyer for you to get you started on the practical application part. The point is not just to say no to everything and sit around doing nothing all week and say, “Now, I’ve met with God.” The idea is to say no to certain things, create space, make room in your life so that you have space for giving your attention to God.

On the inside cover of the flyer is the ascetic self-evaluation (**PIC OF SELF-EVAL**). Six questions, that I’ve adapted from Thomas’s book that can help you evaluate if the ascetic pathway may be a pathway that could be beneficial for your spiritual life.

This should be evaluation #3 and the goal is to have 9 of these evaluation forms by the end of the series that you can compare.

And then on the second side (**PIC OF SECOND SIDE**) I’ve outlined some suggestions for practicing the ascetic pathway. Again, I don’t want my format to become too rigid. Just a guide to help you think and start brainstorming. You can feel free to adapt, adjust, mold this to fit your personality and schedule and life-style.

Start with some scriptures related to simplicity and solitude. Then a few suggestions for ways you can put this into practice and then close by talking to God about your experience of solitude and simplicity.