

I now live lighter and laugh more often in my new servant roles. I still work long hours. In fact I feel like a minnow in an ocean of human need at both jobs. More than ever I am able to rest from work and at work.

### **Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, you rested with me when I was restless with self-interest until I found my rest in you. You have walked with me when I was burdened with selfish ambition and collapsed under the weight of my own ill-fitting yoke. Now I walk with you much lighter. Under your yoke it is much easier to keep step with you. In Jesus' name and for his sake I pray, Amen.

### **Questions to Ponder**

1. What comes to mind when I hear the words "Come to Jesus" (work, surrender, rest, etc.)?
2. How am I like or unlike the man who got on the wagon and did not remove the pack from his back?
3. Have I made my workload heavier than necessary with pride, perfectionism, etc.?
4. What have I gleaned from this chapter that would help me rest at work?

## **Chapter 12**

# **Commuting Between Two Poles, Private and Public Life**

Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."

(Mark 6:31)

When we are able to recognize the poles between which we move and develop sensitivity for this inner field of tension, then we no longer have to feel lost and can begin to discern the direction in which we want to move.<sup>102</sup>

(Henri Nouwen)

Millions of Americans commute to and from work every day regardless of increasing distances and rising fuel prices. By commuting one can receive the benefits of a better paying job in the city and go home to some semblance of small town living. On the way, work progress and productivity consume the commuter's agenda. On the commute home the rewards of rest and relaxation await him or her.

There are three scenarios that commuters hope to avoid. Most try to dodge work projects that hold them captive at the end of the day. If long days go on for weeks at a time, the commuter begins to wonder if it pays to commute. In such situations he or she misses supper, time with his or her spouse, tucking children in bed, and necessary rest. Such workers may elect to get a hotel downtown or sleep on the couch at the office . Regrettably he or she is stuck at the work end of the commute.

The second scenario finds the worker stuck at the home end of the commute. At first this may appear to be ideal. Catching up on home improvement projects, extra time with spouse and children may seem like utopia. However, if one hasn't elected to be at home, being at the home end of the commute for a prolonged period of time usually means something has gone wrong. The worker may be laid off, unemployed, fired, or seriously ill.

In chapter seven I referred to a time when I was desperately ill with hepatitis. There were weeks when it looked doubtful that I was going to

recover. While my commute at the time was a walk from the second floor bedroom to a walkout basement office , I was too ill to make the commute and the office desk collected dust. Unlike the temporary relief of canceling appointments for a few days because of the flu, these were dreaded days of bewilderment. I found myself begging God for a recovery so I could return to serving as a pastor.

I have watched a number of men endure prolonged periods of unemployment. I enjoyed a wonderful friendship with a hardworking Christian neighbor for thirteen years. Twice during those years I watched him agonize through prolonged unemployment. As I drove off to work, he stayed home making phone calls and sending emails hoping that one of them would lead to a new suitable job. Being stuck at home under such circumstances is devastating, especially for men. I've found that men wear their jobs like women wear their homes. Unemployment for most men is a naked embarrassment.

The third situation the commuter tries to avoid is being stuck between work and home. One dreads being late for work because of a traffic jam, bad weather, mechanical failure, accident, illness, or crime. It is just as frustrating to be sitting on the shoulder of the road, stalled, during the drive home, especially when loved ones eagerly await your arrival and you are ready to relax for the evening or weekend. Being stuck at one end or in the middle of a commute is exasperating.

## **THE COMMUTE TO AND FROM SABBATH-REST**

Sabbath-rest works much the same as commuting to work and from work. In both situations the commuter is intentional about rest and work. Both require direction and movement, the main difference is that Sabbathrest is more of a state of mind than a destination.

Physicist Neils Bohr has said, “The opposite of a true statement is a false statement, but the opposite of a profound truth can be another profound truth.”<sup>103</sup> Throughout these chapters I have attempted to point out that Sabbath-rest is a profound truth originating from God. The same God presented another profound truth, an active life of responsibility. Rest must always be viewed in the context of responsibility. It is my conviction that the most effective servants of God are able to travel freely and often between two equally profound poles of truth—rest and responsibility. They refuse to abuse prolonged periods of rest by using them as an escape from responsible activity, nor do they bury themselves in perpetual activity as an escape from reality. Parker J. Palmer asserts in his book, *The Active Life*, that both contemplation and action should open our minds to reality, not illusion.

No action will have lasting effects if it is inconsistent with reality. Ultimately, action will help to reveal what the reality is, if we pay attention to its outcomes. These are the crucial links between action and contemplation, for the function of contemplation in all its forms is to penetrate illusion and help us to touch reality.<sup>104</sup>

It is an unfortunate reality that most people are stuck at either pole or are stalled somewhere between contemplation and activity. Palmer asserts that “A tug-of-war between active and contemplative life has gone on for a long time in the Western world.”<sup>105</sup>

People caught in the gap between monastic values and the demands of active life sometimes simply abandon the spiritual quest. And people who follow a spirituality that does not always respect the energies of actions are sometimes led into passivity and withdrawal, into a diminishment of their own spirits.<sup>106</sup>

Commuting between two poles—private life and public life—requires that one not abuse either rest or activity. In her book, *Between Walden and the Whirlwind*, Jean Fleming presents a well-balanced statement on the subject of solitude and service:

In Christianity, service and solitude are inseparable. God's kingdom is best advanced when they are joined—each stimulating the other to new depths. Walden becomes a stagnant pond without the outflow of service. And serving apart from still moments listening to and drawing strength from God produces a destructive, continual whirlwind. Although service and solitude may be thought of as separate poles in the Christian experience, they are the aggregate of God's intention. Like solitude, service is essential to spiritual health.”<sup>107</sup>

## REST ABUSE

There is a danger in building a strong argument for any single truth; followers may become eccentrics whose lives are badly out of balance. In my attempt to break out of the workaholic trap in a performance-oriented world, I fear that some readers may abuse rest. For several years I have pondered the question, *what are the signs of rest abuse?* When rest moves from retreat to escape, it ceases to be totally constructive. A retreat is always entered with an awareness that one must return to an active life of responsibility. Escape is the voice of false hope which whispers, *just bail out of the active life and all of its demands.*

Contemplation, prayer, and rest must never become an escape from reality, relationships, or responsibilities. In contrast to ancient eastern religions or the modern New Age movement, no aspect of true Christianity is an escape from reality. The disciplines of the true spiritual life are tools which enable one to face the hardships of reality with new strength. Rest is for renewal, not direct flight to some Nirvana.

## ACTIVITY ABUSE

While rest abuse is a problem for some people, others topple in the direction of activity abuse. Parker Palmer describes the abuses of activity:

But the active life also carries a curse. Many of us know what it is to live lives not of action but of frenzy, to go from day to day exhausted and unfulfilled by our attempts to work, create, and care. Many of us know the violence of active life, violence we sometimes inflict on ourselves and sometimes inflict on our world.<sup>108</sup>

I was first introduced to a contemporary use of the Sabbath concept by Gordon MacDonald. His description of the weary workaholic caught my attention, and the very thought of Sabbath-rest calmed me from the inside out. MacDonald illustrated the negative impact of an overactive life by depicting what some Florida residents saw one morning as they looked outside their apartment windows:

The ground beneath the street in front of their building had literally collapsed, creating a massive depression that Floridians call a sinkhole. Tumbling into the ever-deepening pit were automobiles, pavement, sidewalks, and lawn furniture. The building itself would obviously be next to go. Sinkholes occur, scientists say, when underground streams drain away during seasons of drought, causing the ground at the surface to lose its underlying support.<sup>109</sup>

MacDonald goes on to say that many people experience a sinkhole syndrome because they neglect the *private world*. A frantic pace and external pressures can cause a person to feel like the outer world is caving in on him or her.

## JESUS LIVED AN ACTIVE LIFE

A casual reading of Luke chapter four reveals that Jesus lived an active life. For one reason or another people lined up to see Jesus. No surprise since Jesus was the most important person to ever walk planet earth. He was the Messiah, the link between man and God, and the world depended on him. God the Father counted on him to accomplish a one-of-a-kind mission. Jesus could not afford to experience a sinkhole syndrome. No man has ever been in more demand than our Lord. More than once I have asked, *what would Jesus do in this situation or ministry opportunity?* More than once I have found out what he would do by reading the Gospels.

## **WE NEED OUR LORD'S PRIVATE LIFE TO CARRY OUT OUR LORD'S PUBLIC MINISTRY**

This chapter is designed to bring context to our discussion of rest and balance to the work-rest rhythm of our lives. I believe balance is best achieved by observing our Lord's life.

Our Lord did more than keep the Sabbath. He embodied the Sabbath. He demonstrated the true purpose of the Sabbath by balancing rest and work. Many passages within the Gospels communicate the secret of our Lord's stamina. His private life was the key to his public ministry. We need our Lord's private life to carry out our Lord's public ministry.

On one occasion Jesus stressed the importance of utilizing opportunities to work. "As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work" (John 9:4). On another he said to his disciples when the crowds were pressing them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest" (Mark 6:31). His example throughout the Gospels exhibits how to commute between two poles. One pole represents rest, retreat, contemplation, prayer and private life, while

the other signifies activity, work, interaction, purpose, direction and public life.

## **COMMUTING BETWEEN TWO POLES PRIVATE LIFE AND POPULARITY**

As a person with a workaholic ancestry and a compulsion for accomplishment, I have gradually become aware of the daily pressures that bend me in the direction of work and the persuasions that compel me to get stuck at the work end of the commute. The first persuasion may be categorized as a desire for popularity. I must admit that I am tempted to sacrifice private life on the altar of popularity. Not that I hunted for opportunities to be on stage while people cheered. It was simply about pleasing people.

Years ago I was confronted with the realization that I wanted to be liked by people. That may sound rather benign on the surface; it was certainly healthier than wanting people to hate me. However, I tended to please people in order to avoid rejection. For me pleasing people translated into working longer and resting less in an attempt to make people like me, an endless and in many cases impossible task.

As I read the following passage I grappled with the fact that Jesus was not governed by popularity:

When the sun was setting, the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness, and laying his hands on each one, he healed them. <sup>41</sup> Moreover, demons came out of many people, shouting, "You are the Son of God!" But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew he was the Christ. At daybreak Jesus went out to a solitary place. The people were looking for him and when they came to where he was, they tried to keep him from leaving them. <sup>43</sup> But he



said, “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.”

(Luke 4:40-43)

The setting of the sun on the Sabbath meant the sick could now be carried to Jesus for healing. From various diseases to demonic possession Jesus healed them all. Given his effectiveness, I get the picture that they would have broken down a gate in order to see Jesus. But Jesus did not deal with them impersonally, like they were some sort of mob. He did not just wave his arm and all were healed. Instead he personally placed his hands on each one.

Personal ministry is especially exhausting. I have wondered, *would I have exhausted all my energy by milking the opportunity for all it was worth; or would I have done as Jesus did and broken loose from the crowd in order to replenish spiritual strength and seek new direction?* Jesus sought strength and direction from his Father as he “went out to a solitary place.”

Solitude costs! Running off to some solitary place looks like political suicide to the person seeking popularity: *You don't run from a captive audience!* Most celebrities are careful not to turn their backs on crowds for fear of losing their hard-earned fame. Crowds of people are impatient; they are not kept waiting very long before departing in search of another sensation.

However, addiction to a public arena also costs! Eugene Peterson exposes the deception of crowd pleasing:

Any part of our lives that is turned over to the crowd makes it and us worse. The larger the crowd, the smaller our lives. Pliny the Elder once said that the Romans, when they couldn't make a building beautiful, made it big. The practice continues to be popular: If we can't do it well,

we make it larger. We add dollars to our income, rooms to our houses, activities to our schedules, appointments to our calendars. And the quality of life diminishes with each addition.

On the other hand, every time that we retrieve a part of our life from the crowd and respond to God's call to us, we are that much more ourselves, more human. Every time we reject the habits of the crowd and practice the disciplines of faith, we become a little more alive.<sup>110</sup>

Our Lord lived above any urge to be popular. Personal glory was among the many privileges he left in heaven when he came to earth. Philippians two indicates the issue of earthly popularity was settled long before his coming as "He emptied Himself" (Philippians 2:7, NASB), and "made himself of no reputation" (Philippians 2:7, KJV). Popularity is an issue that I must settle deep within the attitudes and appetites of my heart. Paul exhorts, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:4).

I must also deal with the desire to help every person and reconcile with the disappointment of not being able to help everyone. Our Lord lived above the desire to complete everything in his earthly ministry. Upon emptying himself to become man, as a man he became limited in time and space. This meant that there were times when he had to choose between people and prayer. He had to give up the dream of healing every person during his earthly ministry. The Gospels do not indicate that Jesus met every human need in even one city. Jesus would not attempt to heal every blind man, but enough so the public got the message that Jesus cares!

While Luke chapter four does not specifically state what Jesus did in solitude, chapter five gives us a pretty good idea: "But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (Luke 5:16).

Jesus taught his disciples to pray in private, “But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (Matthew 6:6). His practice of prayer taught them, “as God is unseen, you must be unseen if you wish to find Him.”<sup>111</sup> In his book, *A Center of Quiet*, David Runcorn has helped me appreciate the value of praying in solitude. He equates private prayer to punctuation. Just as commas and periods give meaning and flow to writing, solitude and prayer give direction to my life:

Punctuation is a helpful way of thinking about Jesus’ relationship with silence and solitude. Jesus punctuated his life with silence and solitude. His times alone were the commas, pauses and full stops in the story of his life. They gave the rest of his life its structure, direction and balance. His words and his works were born out of those hours of silent waiting upon God.<sup>112</sup>

It appears that our Lord received both the direction and courage to pull away from the expectations of the crowd. He emphatically replied, “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent” (Luke 4:43). The narrative implies there is an association between prayer and direction. Ministry was defined and redirected after a private session of prayer. It was not about the needs of a single village, nor was it purely about physical needs. The Gospel message extended beyond the physical realm.

Private prayer seems like such a waste of time when I am surrounded by needy people. *I will just fall farther behind if I pause to pray.* That’s how I think. In reality God is always ahead of us and prayer is the only way to catch up with his plan and will for our lives.

There is a paradox regarding prayer. I have discovered that it is necessary to slow down to pray. By doing so I connect with the God who created light-

speed. An illustration from outer space may shed some light on this confusing concept:

Astronaut Michael Collins has described the problem of two orbiting space vehicles trying to link up with each other. Unlike the rendezvous of two airplanes refueling, the vehicle behind will only go into a higher orbit if it speeds up. The ship's commander must resist all natural instincts and slow down, dropping his craft into a lower orbit. This enables him to catch up and maneuver into position.<sup>113</sup>

To get ahead in my spiritual life I must slow down and wait on God. There is no substitute for waiting on God, the source of all life and energy.

## **PRIVATE LIFE AND PRODUCTIVITY**

Bottom-line productivity continues to drive industrialized nations. How much? How many? How far? How short of a time period? These are the questions that dominate business transactions. More-for-less is the focus of the twenty-first century. However, productivity without boundaries produces short-sighted plans that yield long-term disasters.

Our firstborn son, Scott, is the safety director for a large trucking company. The days when trucking was as simple as *get a load and go* are long gone. Everyone wants their product delivered *yesterday*, with the guarantee that freeways and highways are safe *twenty-four-seven*. The push to deliver a product on time is complicated by numerous regulations, especially safety regulations. No wonder a single accident involving a truck can bankrupt an entire company and destroy the lives of entire families. Life is not totally about productivity; it never has been!

If our Lord were to be graded at the end of his life by modern standards of productivity, his marks would be less than superior. Most of his time was spent with twelve disciples whose personal track records were less than

spectacular. From a historical perspective Christ must have done something right; after all, who in the literate world has not heard of Christianity?

Philosopher William James affirmed “that the great use of one’s life is to spend it for something that will outlast it, for the value of life is computed not by its duration but by its donation.”<sup>114</sup> Jesus Christ is a perfect portrayal of this statement. Without conducting fulltime ministry for more than three years, his teachings were transmitted from generation to generation. Without traveling one hundred miles from home, his ministry had universal impact. Without achieving a formal education, volumes have been written about him.

Jesus Christ depicts quality. The total of all human existence does not equal the quality of his one life. No eloquence of speech has surpassed the excellence of his sayings. No sacrifice approaches the contribution of his sufferings. Besides the perfection of Jesus as a person, there is another factor that must be considered significant to his productivity.

The selection of a workforce is vital to productivity. Jesus would select disciples to be with him and spread his ministry. His selection would be validated in history, for those few disciples would bear the responsibility of proclaiming the Gospel to the world.

Before making this monumental decision, Jesus labored intentionally in private conversation with his and our Heavenly Father:

One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. <sup>13</sup> When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles: <sup>14</sup> Simon (whom he named Peter), his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, <sup>15</sup> Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon who

was called the Zealot, <sup>16</sup> Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.  
(Luke 6:12-16)

*My flesh says to me, prayer seems like an unwise use of time when so much depends on the selection of individuals. I must question myself, is that what I would have done when so much rested on the selection of these individuals? Wouldn't it be wise to interview a few more just in case there was a better choice out there? Perhaps a few more questions to the current nominees will reveal something that I have overlooked regarding these potential disciples. Surely there are more tests that we can run on them. I must admit that I am tempted to sacrifice private life on the altar of productivity.*

*The Master Plan of Evangelism* by Robert Coleman has remained for decades as a classic regarding Christ's plan to bring Christianity to the world. He has identified that Christ provided no back-up plan if his disciples failed. His initial selection must be right. Coleman comments on the selection process of the original disciples: "The initial objective of Jesus' plan was to enlist men who could bear witness to His life and carry on His work after He returned to the Father.... There is no evidence of haste in the selection of these disciples; just determination."<sup>115</sup>

While a detailed account of that prayer was not provided in the narrative, I am led to believe that Jesus must have cleared each name with the Father. Jesus, the Son of God, said, "By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me" (John 5:30). Each disciple was carefully selected. Not even Judas was a mistake.

While taking Doctor of Ministry classes at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, I had a conversation with Robert Coleman. The topic was

discipleship.

“Unlike Jesus I have never had twelve disciples at a time,” I confessed.

He commented, “Jesus had twelve, and within that group he had three that were closer to him. He also had Judas; and that too was good.”

I nodded knowing that he was referring to Judas’ betrayal of Jesus which led to the crucifixion and our redemption. Silenced by the profundity of the thought, I walked away. I have pondered Coleman’s comment many times since. Judas was no mistake. A betrayer in the midst was God’s plan and Jesus knew it. Numerous texts indicate that Jesus had more than a background check on Judas; he knew what Judas would eventually do: “Then Jesus replied, ‘Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!’” (John 6:70). “While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled ” (John 17:12).

Having served on several church/denominational nominating and search committees, I am sad to say that for some on those committees prayer was like a set of bookends. Prayer simply provided a means of getting meetings started and adjourned; but was not valued as an essential part of the process. Meeting agendas consisted of proceeding through prescribed checklists designed to separate the qualified from the unqualified. Despite the use of strategic checklists, selections often boiled down to whom the committee knew. The outcome produced a list of recycled leaders and little thought toward the development of future leaders.

However, sometimes there were people on the committees for whom prayer proved to be an important part of the selection process. For such individuals no checklist or personal knowledge was conclusive evidence for accepting or rejecting anyone. To the frustration of others, prayer was not only asking

but waiting on God for answers. Sometimes answers showed up as a hesitation toward someone who appeared to be well qualified. At other times it provided assurance regarding a person who was not particularly impressive. There was no urgency to produce a list for these people until they had thoroughly prayed.

Sometimes I was that person who had thoroughly prayed and received either reluctance or a confirmation from above. It was a thrill to observe new leaders surprising congregations with their capabilities and fresh ideas.

Other times I was in a hurry to produce a list of nominees to meet election deadlines. Rushing on without prayer often proved disastrous. Putting productivity before prayer is often unproductive and sometimes disastrous. I would agree with the statement: bad character shows up at the worst time.

If it would have been presumptuous for the Son of God to select disciples without first communicating with his Heavenly Father, it would be incredibly presumptuous for me to attempt to be productive without interacting with my Heavenly Father. In his book, *The Grand Essentials*, Ben Patterson correctly includes prayer as a daily essential:

That is why it is so important to begin the day with prayer. It is presumptuous to begin any other way! As workers, it is our first responsibility to check in with the boss and get in tune with what he has been doing while we slept and what he requires of us while we are awake. To just get up and rush into the day is to presume that we are the ones who are in charge of our lives and our work.<sup>116</sup>

As a reminder to myself and all who read my e-mails, I have selected Productive Rest (*productiverest@*) as my email address. I thoroughly believe that Sabbath-rest is highly productive. Functioning without such rest proves unproductive. If life were a sprint, working without rest might



be both productive and survivable. Since life is a marathon, rest is essential to thriving productively. Rest and rise to work productively!

Thomas Merton unearthed a poem of Chuang Tzu, a fourth-century B.C. Chinese Taoist teacher which illustrates the necessity of solitude prior to decision making and seasons of productivity:

### **“THE WOODCARVER”**

Khing, the master carver, made a bell stand  
Of precious wood. When it was finished ,  
All who saw it were astounded. They said it must be  
The work of spirits.  
The prince of Lu said to the master carver:

“What is your secret?”

Khing replied: “I am only a workman:  
I have no secret. There is only this:  
When I began to think about the work you commanded  
I guarded my spirit, did not expend it  
On trifles, that were not to the point.  
I fasted in order to set  
My heart at rest.  
Three days fasting, I had forgotten gain and success.  
After five days  
I had forgotten praise or criticism.  
After seven days  
I had forgotten my body  
With all its limbs.

By this time all thought of your Highness

And of the court had faded away.  
All that might distract me from the work  
Had vanished.  
I was collected in the single thought  
Of the bell stand.

Then I went to the forest  
To see the trees in their own natural state.  
When the right tree appeared before my eyes,  
The bell stand also appeared in it, clearly, beyond doubt.  
All I had to do was to put forth my hand  
And begin.

If I had not met this particular tree  
There would have been  
No bell stand at all.  
What happened?  
My own collected thought  
Encountered the hidden potential in the wood;  
From this life encounter came the work  
Which you ascribe to the spirits.”<sup>117</sup>

While Christianity is not to be confused with ancient Taoism, the ancient Taoist has identified some universal truths regarding solitude as it relates to productivity. Not just any wood will do, not just any tree will do. The person who produces quality work conditions himself or herself for the task by removing distractions and seeking to find the right material for the right job.

What is applicable to wood is also valuable in the realm of humanity. In order to produce the desired result there must be respect for the grain and the bent of personhood. All too often leaders fail to produce because they

force a rigid job description on a person without consideration of personality, desires, or gifts. The effective leader takes into consideration not only the job but the person for the job. This consideration requires time alone with the true and living God who is equally interested in both task and worker.

Perpetual motion is not the key to productivity. Bill Hybels, in his timely book *Too Busy Not to Pray*, stresses the need to balance productivity with privacy and prayer:

If we are involved in the marketplace, we are trained to believe that time is money. That's why we talk about managing time, using it efficiently and profitably, and—as a result of our concern—dealing with time pressures.

Cram more in. Start earlier. Work later. Take work home. Dictate on the commuter train. Make phone calls in the car. Use a laptop computer in airports. Schedule breakfasts, lunches and dinners for profit. Performance, performance, performance—it's the key to promotion, to compensation increase, to power....

No one can become an authentic Christian on a steady diet of activity. Power comes out of stillness; strength comes out of solitude. Decisions that change the entire course of your life come out of the Holy of Holies, your times of stillness before God.<sup>118</sup>

## **PRIVATE LIFE AND PRESSURE**

Tucked away between the steep mountains of northern Idaho rests a small manufacturing plant with a big assignment. What is designed and built there is extremely high performance, able to carry fuel and cargo more than its weight, and able to both land and take off loaded within a stretch of 1,000

feet of unpaved runway. The Kodiak is a single engine turbo jet designed to replace less effective aircraft and advance mission aviation world-wide. To date only two exist. One is used as a demonstrator, the other for testing. The FAA tests materials, design, and performance in circumstances far beyond what the aircraft is likely to endure in any flight or landing situation. These tests are performed in private so that when the Kodiak performs its public service, the outcome is trustworthy, not disastrous.

The airline industry spends millions of dollars on simulators designed to test and train pilots. These pilots experience bad weather, mechanical failures, and their own pilot error in private, to produce right responses in public service with passengers in the air and populations below. Private aviation training is designed to prevent public disaster.

I believe God intends believers to experience immense pressure in private so they generate right responses in public. It is better to be stress tested in the Lord's quiet presence than to react irresponsibly in public. The Bible is full of examples of both. Luke's Gospel provides the most vivid example of a private meeting under pressure.

Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him. <sup>40</sup> On reaching the place, he said to them, "Pray that you will not fall into temptation." <sup>41</sup> He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, <sup>42</sup> "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." <sup>43</sup> An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. <sup>44</sup> And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. <sup>45</sup> When he rose from prayer and went back to the disciples, he found them asleep, exhausted from sorrow. <sup>46</sup> "Why are you sleeping?" he asked them. "Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation."

(Luke 22:39-46)

It was the hour of our Lord's greatest temptation. Luke, the physician, indicates that Jesus' anguish was so acute that the corpuscles in his head broke causing blood to drip like sweat. Jesus was about to experience an agony far beyond physical suffering on the cross. The cross was not the subject of prayer. His prayer was about the *cup*. In the Old Testament this cup symbolized the wrath of God toward man's sins (Psalm 11:6; Isaiah 51:17; Ezekiel 23:33).<sup>119</sup>

Jesus was about to consume the cup that contained the wrath of God toward human sin. The cross was man's tool of wrath toward criminals. The cup was God's instrument of wrath toward sinners. He would suffer the penalty due our sins so we wouldn't have to.

He was about to perform a ministry that would prove him absolutely worthy of eternal popularity. Without this service he would never produce one Christian. Without a cross-bearing Savior all ministry would provide nothing but temporary relief, and his disciples would have nothing to proclaim. It all rested on Jesus.

As was his habit, Jesus went to the Mount of Olives, which overlooked the city of his atoning death. Jesus settled the matter of the cross in private at Gethsemane, so that he just had to endure the events when they happened. While my immediate response says, *that is one big "just,"* I am reminded that indecision heaps more anguish on stressful situations. Without predetermining your response, the reactions of others as well as your own are uncertain. Jesus wrestled with the dread of it all in private. When it came time to face the cross and jeering crowds, Jesus had been there in private with his Heavenly Father.

Prayer equalizes pressure. The following illustration by Jay Kessler has helped me understand the power of private prayer:

A bathysphere is a miniature submarine used to explore the ocean floor in places where the water pressure would crush a conventional submarine like an aluminum can. Bathyspheres compensate for the pressure with plate steel several inches thick. Yet fish remain supple and free at the bottom of the ocean where the water pressure is great. How? They compensate for the outside pressure by equalizing the pressure within themselves. Jesus was equalizing the pressure produced by His public life with an intense private life. You can't meet the pressures of public life if you are always in public.<sup>120</sup>

In prayer Jesus was tuning his will to the Father's will much like a concert violinist tunes his instrument before a concert. First the musician tunes his A string to a standard A 440 (440 vibrations per second). Then he tunes the other three strings to the A string. The sound of a violin being tuned can be quite annoying. But he goes through this agony before thousands because he knows that an out-of-tune string can tarnish if not ruin his performance. Our Lord was making sure his will was tuned to the perfect standard of his Father's will before performing his greatest concert on the cross.

J. Oswald Sanders has experienced one of the most profound truths about prayer: "I have found that a great deal of the praying has to do with getting my mind in the place where I have a real preference for the will of God above everything else."<sup>121</sup>

His will was in harmony with his Father's and his body was strengthened by an angel. Once the subject of will was settled within himself, he was free to settle the issue of sin, of which he had none. He simply arose from prayer and acted in obedience. I am so glad that he prayed that night.

## **FAILING TO HANDLE PRESSURE IN PRIVATE**

An example of failure to handle pressure in private that ended up in public embarrassment took place that same evening. Realizing that his crucifixion would put great pressure on his disciples, Jesus urged them to pray. “Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.” That evening the disciples were tempted to exercise both fight and flight. As a lead disciple, Peter would yield to both. Immediately after the prayer meeting in the garden he would slice off the servant of the high priest’s ear (Luke 22:50, John 18:10), and he managed to deny his Lord three times before sunrise (Luke 22:60).

Moses must have also regretted his failure to work through pressure in private. Most of the time Moses handled the magnitude of his leadership position in private with God. His relationship with God was so intimate that it was said of him, “The LORD would speak to Moses face-to-face, as a man speaks with his friend” (Exodus 33:11). However, Moses allowed his anger towards the complaining Israelites to get the best of him. Moses struck the rock and publicly dishonored the Lord.

He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock and Moses said to them, “Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?” But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them.”  
(Numbers 20:10-12)

As long as Moses processed the pressure of leading that ungrateful nation with the Lord Almighty in private he responded honorably. Unfortunately there were a few occasions where Moses got stuck on the public end of the commute. His loss was great!

I must admit that I am tempted to sacrifice private life on the altar of pressure. There are times when pressure isolates me from God, driving me

away from where the stress tests ought to be performed. It may seem like a harmless sin that everyone will understand; but if I sinned in private because I am under pressure, I am likely to make mistakes that are impossible to correct. A sarcastic remark, an angry tone, an ignored opportunity to respond as Christ's shepherd, are just a few outcomes of unprocessed stress.

I recall attending a meeting for church elders four days after returning from a three-week short-term missions trip in Russia. Still suffering from jet lag, I was trying to dig my way out of an avalanche of ministry challenges that had accumulated while I was gone. But that was not the worst of it. After reading a certain report I was angry. Before the trip I had forewarned leaders that a certain situation would occur if we did not take action. Nothing had been done. I expressed my anger in my own report, but denied being angry at the meeting. After a long discussion a veteran elder asked, "Jim, would you like to collect your report and remove it from the record?" I said, "Yes, I would."

I had reason to be angry but not in the way I expressed it. Had I held my peace until I had processed my anger with the Lord in private, I would not have strained my relationships with the leaders I loved. Apologies may smooth over poor responses, but fail to reverse words and actions that should have been filtered in private.

I believe God allows temptations to come to us in private so that we can process them with him and work out a godly way of escape. Private time with him is often the escape Paul introduced in II Corinthians 10:13: "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."



Somewhere in my Christian development I was told to suppress tempting thoughts when they came to my mind in private. I have found that it is better to process them with God in private. The process is usually working through a series of questions, such as: *What triggered this thought? Where did it come from? Why am I tempted in this particular way? What would be the outcome and cost of carrying out such a thought? What is my way of escape if I am ever presented with such a tempting situation? What boundaries must I establish to prevent failure at the point of temptation?* In this way, I “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (II Corinthians 10:5).

When such temptations actually present themselves in public, I have already taken the way of escape the Lord provided in private. It is like I have already been there and foreseen the outcome of carrying through with the temptation. Having wrestled with it in private, I am not taken by surprise so as to react unaware of the consequences. I like what Corrie ten Boom, a survivor of the Holocaust, said about temptations: “When temptation knocks I ask Jesus to open the door.” Jesus knows how to slam the door on temptation.

## **SUMMARY**

Before every takeoff of a commercial flight, a flight attendant announces where the emergency exits are in the event of an emergency. It is easy to ignore her rehearsed monologue and to just continue to read, daydream, or converse with the person next to you. If we ever need to use an emergency exit, we will be glad for every moment we listened to her instructions, thus avoiding panic and potential harm.

Perhaps the greatest temptation we face is the temptation to ignore private moments which prepare us for making right decisions in public. It can be said that we fail temptations in private before we fail them in public. It is

the neglect of preparation in private that leads to catastrophe. Author and Pastor Ron Mehl reminds us that respecting Sabbath-rest will always be a battle:

But please remember this: the path to Sabbath rest will always be a contested path. Haven't you ever wondered why it seems so incredibly difficult to find these times with God in our life? Why it seems like such a chore to simply pick up your Bible or get down on your knees to pray? The enemy knows this path to the Sabbath will lead you to rest and righteousness and perspective and a reordering of your priorities. And Satan will try to thwart you. He doesn't want you to find that path. Never doubt it! He has a thousand ways to sidetrack and divert you.

Satan knows that if he keeps us striving in our own strength, the joy and sense of purpose in our lives will drain like oil out of a quarter-sized hole in your car's oil pan.<sup>122</sup>

### **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, I praise you for leaving your example as I commute between work and rest. You flowed easily between the two without being uptight with rest because of tasks undone, or frustrated with work because of much needed rest. You never got burned-out or broken down in the pursuit of your global mission for eternity. Your example will help me finish well. In Jesus' name and for his sake I pray, Amen.

### **Questions to Ponder**

1. Am I stuck at one end or the other, or in the middle of my commute between work and rest?
2. Have I learned to equalize the pressures of life with rest?
3. What mistakes have I made in public because I refused to rest in private?