Psalm 63 *Heart Applications: Solitude*

***Boom Beach***I have a confession to make. A couple of years ago, I was addicted to a video game.

It was one of those games for your phone, specifically the game *Boom Beach.* I saw an advertisement for it on TV that made me laugh—they used little cartoon characters that were always accidentally blowing themselves up—so I went to the play store on my tablet and found out I could download it for free.

It’s a world building game. Every player has their own island. You can make choices, and spend imaginary money, to improve your island. And you also build an army that allows you to attack other islands, islands either controlled by the game or other players. Over time you can join task forces that link you with other players—anonymous people from all over the world that you have no idea who they are—and you can go on missions together. There’s a function that allows you to chat with these players. There are also different daily rewards and daily challenges. And, of course, there is a scoreboard that lets you know how you are doing compared to other players.

It started innocently enough. I had the game on my tablet and I would play around with it when I had a moment of free time or two. But over time, as my island got bigger and I got more skilled with the game I found myself investing more and more time. I even loaded a version of the game on my phone so I could have two armies on the same task force. My phone or tablet would beep every time something happened in the game, and it got so that the beeps caused an almost Pavlovian response in me. I found myself thinking about strategy when I went to bed at night and checking it first thing in the morning.

I’ll admit, I was pretty bad. At first Beth and Ellie would joke about Dad checking on his Beach, but after awhile I could tell they were pretty annoyed by it. We went on vacation to Glacier National Park, and every time we got close to a Wireless Network I was checking my game. Even my coworkers here at church noticed and made comments.

I was addicted. At first, I didn’t want to admit it, but after awhile it was pretty clear, and I couldn’t pretend. So I went cold turkey. One day I just decided that I needed to be done. So I deleted it off my phone and off my tablet, and I quit. In the March newsletter I wrote about how I have an old phone and it hardly holds any apps. This is one of the reasons I’m not in a hurry to update it. I don’t need to get addicted to another game.

***Engagement***I did some reading about internet companies this week, and I discovered that what happened to me is exactly what they are going for. Internet businesses—whether it is an online game, or a social media site like Facebook, or a shopping site like Amazon—are aiming for “engagement.” They are measuring how long they can keep people engaged with their product. The longer they can keep us clicking or tapping or scrolling–so that they can show us as many pages or ads as possible—the more successful they feel they are. So there is always some new thing, some daily reward, some incentive to come back, some click-bait headline to grab our attention. There is always something to drive us to distraction.

Distraction has been an issue for humanity ever since the fall of Adam and Eve. But in our modern, technological world there are perhaps more distraction than ever before.

A Christian Blogger named Tim Challies notes a survey done by a group called Synovate:

More than 4 in 10 Americans say they can’t live without their mobile phone; 82 percent say they never leave home without it; nearly half of them sleep with it nearby. It is not enough for them to send text messages all day; they need to have their phones with them in case something happens during the night. Meanwhile, more and more of us are taking our cell phones and computers on vacation with us, mixing work time with leisure time. Just glance around your church on a Sunday morning, and you may well notice people sending text messages during worship. <https://www.faithgateway.com/danger-distraction/#.XJKloShKjIU>

He then goes on to tell the story of attending a Christian conference. During the worship portion of the event he spotted a woman who had one hand raised in worship, while her other hand was busy tapping away on her phone. That seems to me to be the ultimate picture of the modern, distracted Christian: worshipping God with one hand while texting about it with the other.

We are in the midst of a series we are calling Heart Applications. We are talking about how just as there are different personality types and temperaments, there are also different ways of relating to God. Not all of us are cut out for 30 minutes of Bible reading followed by 15 minutes of prayer. Some of us need to go for a walk in nature to connect with God. Some of us need to repeat familiar prayers and rituals. Some of us need to be active.

And some of us need solitude. That’s our heart application for today: solitude. I’ll define it like this:

**Solitude is the Heart Application of limiting distractions so that we can rest in the love of God.**

Words associated with solitude are simplicity, separation, and contemplation. When we think about people who prefer this way of connecting with God we might think of those who retreat to monasteries or convents, or the recluse who withdraws to a cabin on the fringes of society. A Biblical example of solitude would be John the Baptist, who lived in the desert and limited his diet and his possessions. Those examples might seem a little extreme, and might make you think that solitude is not for you; but at its heart, solitude is really about putting away the things that tend to distract us in order to put our focus on God. And we could all use more of that.

To use the language of the internet companies, we could say that solitude is about engagement. Engagement with God. When we practice the actions of solitude that is our goal, to engage with God, to increase our attention on Him, to stay connected to Him. A good picture of this in scripture can be found in **Psalm 63:1-8**. Let me read it:

**1**You, God, are my God,
    earnestly I seek you;
I thirst for you,
    my whole being longs for you,
in a dry and parched land
    where there is no water.

**2**I have seen you in the sanctuary
    and beheld your power and your glory.
**3**Because your love is better than life,
    my lips will glorify you.
**4**I will praise you as long as I live,
    and in your name I will lift up my hands.
**5**I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods;
    with singing lips my mouth will praise you.

**6**On my bed I remember you;
    I think of you through the watches of the night.
**7**Because you are my help,
    I sing in the shadow of your wings.
**8**I cling to you;
    your right hand upholds me.

What stands out in this Psalm is David’s passion for God. The first verse uses the image of being in a dry and parched land. Imagine, for a moment, what that would feel like. Imagine being lost in the sands of the Sinai peninsula. Imagine wandering for a day or two under the hot, baking sun and then shivering through the cold, frigid nights. Imagine being all alone. And then, imagine how thirsty you would be. Above all else, your body would be crying out for water.

That, the Psalmist says, is how he feels about God. He is passionately seeking Him. His soul thirsts for Him. He wants to be with God. He wants to cling to God. He wants to see more of God’s glory.

And so, He is prepared to do whatever it takes to be engaged with God. He is prepared to eliminate distractions so that He can give His full attention to God. That’s solitude.

Now, this Psalm is not exactly a “how to” manual for the practice of solitude. I chose it more because it expresses the desire and the longing that should drive us to solitude. But I have three actions of solitude that are at least hinted at in this Psalm, and which I can illustrate with additional scripture. So that’s what we are going to talk about now: three actions of solitude. Three ways that we can limit distractions in order to rest in God’s love.

***Between God’s Shoulders***The first act of solitude is **contemplating God’s love.** Our first responsibility as Christians is to love God (Matt. 22:37). So one of the most important things we can do is simply adore God.

I see this in **verse 3** of the Psalm:

**3**Because your love is better than life,
    my lips will glorify you.

That’s the question we must ask: do we see God’s love as better than life? And if not, do we fully understand God’s love?

The language the Bible uses to describe God’s love for us can sound almost romantic, it might even make you feel uncomfortable. God is consistently described in the Bible as the Bridegroom, the heavenly lover. And we, His people, are His Bride. The whole story of Jesus coming to earth can be described as a divine romance, in which Jesus is defeating all rivals for our affection, and which will be consummated in the wedding feast at the end of Revelation. Think of every romantic movie you have ever seen, of how inspiring it is to see love win out in the end against all odds, and then realize that Jesus loves you with an intensity that makes every leading man in every romantic movie seem like a school boy crush.

I came across a verse this week that gave me a powerful new image of God’s love. It’s from the book of Deuteronomy, in a section where Moses is going tribe by tribe through the 12 tribes of Israel and pronouncing a blessing over them. In **Deuteronomy 33:12** he gives the blessing for the tribe of Benjamin:

**12**About Benjamin he said:

“Let the beloved of the Lord rest secure in him,
    for he shields him all day long,
    and the one the Lord loves rests between his shoulders.”

This is who we are: the beloved of the Lord. Do you think of yourself as the Lord’s beloved? You should. He gave His life for you. He died on the cross for your sins. He took on sin and death so that a path could be paved for you to spend eternity in His home. So that you can rest secure in Him. So that you could shelter under His protection.

I love the last line. “The one the Lord loves rests between his shoulders.” Two images come to mind when I hear that, and they are both images of a father with a little child. On the one hand, I think of a Dad swinging a toddler up onto his shoulders—it’s an image of laughter and joy and playfulness. On the other hand, between the shoulders could be on the front, on the chest. I have an image of a father holding a child close to his breast—it’s an image of comfort and care and tenderness.

Either way, that’s a picture of God’s love for you. If things are good for you right now, He wants to swing you up on His shoulders and rejoice with you. If things are hard for you right now, He wants to pull you in close and cry with you. But no matter what, God loves you.

The first action of solitude is to rest in God’s love, to bask in it, to soak it in.

So how can you do this? Here are some things you can do to contemplate God’s love every day:

* **Sing *Jesus Loves Me* to yourself.**

It’s a simple children’s song, but it is also a vital and profound truth. It’s said that when Karl Barth, one of the most influential theologians of the 20th century, was at a conference near the end of his life, he was asked for the most important thing he had learned in all his studies. His answer was to say: “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”

* **Preach the Gospel to yourself.**

Again and again, throughout the day, remind yourself of the good news of Jesus. Jesus came to earth, for me. Jesus died on the cross, for me. Jesus came back to life, for me. Jesus is coming again, for me. There is no better news, no more important message, and we need to remember it again and again and again.

* **Read a book about God’s love.**

Go to our library and check out a book that tells you how much God loves you. Some titles that spring to mind are *Crazy Love*, by Francis Chan. *Grace is Greater* and *AHA!* By Kyle Idleman. *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* By Philip Yancey. Just about any book written by Max Lucado. Each one of these books will help you to just soak in the wonder of God’s love.

Find ways to contemplate the depths of God’s love for you.

***Through the Watches of the Night***Now, the second act of solitude is **being still before God.** One of the best ways to limit distractions and rest in God’s love is to carve out the time and space to be quiet before God.

Here it is in **Psalm 63, verse 6:**

**6**On my bed I remember you;
    I think of you through the watches of the night

David is literally talking about staying up late, or getting up early, so that he can have quiet conversations with God while everyone else is fast asleep. Sometimes we need to be completely set apart from all the other distractions and activities of the day to fully devote our attention to God.

Tim Challies writes:

…we will need to work tirelessly to eliminate distractions and to focus on what matters most, without being drawn aside by the beeps and buzzes and the demand for efficiency. God created us in such a way that we naturally respond to stimuli within our environment. When we hear a noise, we listen and respond with a turning of the head; when we see a flashing light, we see and respond with a turning of attention.

God created us this way for our own good and protection. Yet too much stimulus can keep us from focusing our attention on one thing. There is good reason that libraries are places of quiet and that there are no strobe lights in church sanctuaries.

Christians have long understood the importance of quiet solitude.

David knew this, which is why he rose early in the day, before he could be distracted, to spend time alone with God…

David knew that a life of virtue required a life of thoughtful meditation. David did not have to contend with a cell phone that would ring whether he was awake or asleep, working or worshiping. He did not have to contend with the fast pace of e-mail or text messaging. He did not have to wrestle with whether to begin the day in worship or in checking his Facebook account. If we are to live with virtue in this digital age, we need to recognize that we are engaged in a battle, at war with distraction. We must learn to discover what distracts us, destroy it, cultivate concentration, and seek out solitude regularly and habitually. <https://www.faithgateway.com/danger-distraction/#.XJKloShKjIU>

If we truly want to hear from God, we must learn to be silent before Him. Jeremiah puts it like this, in **Lamentations 3:25-26:**

**25**The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him,
    to the one who seeks him;
**26**it is good to wait quietly
    for the salvation of the Lord.

The Lord is good to the one who seeks Him. It is good to wait quietly for the Lord. There is a reason monastic communities often take vows of silence. It isn’t a desire to be anti-social that drives them to stop speaking, but a desire to leave room for God to speak.

The second action of solitude, then, is to be still before God. Carve out space and time to be quiet. Here are some suggestions for ways that you can make room for silence in your life:

* **Choose a time.**

Schedule a time to meet with God, perhaps during the watches of the night. If you are a night owl, and often find yourself awake after everyone else in your household has gone to sleep, consider using those quiet hours to talk with God. Instead of channel surfing late night TV or binge watching Netflix, turn your focus to Him. Put your insomnia to work. Instead of being frustrated by your inability to sleep, turn it into an opportunity for prayer and worship. Often, lack of sleep is connected to stress and worry. Instead of continuing to brood on your worries, make them matters of prayer.

Or, if you are more of a morning person, get up a bit earlier and enjoy the quiet with God. It’s one of the reasons we chose the coffee cup as the symbol for this Heart App.

* **Choose a place.**

Connected with the idea of setting a time for focusing on God is the idea of having a special place for meeting with God. It might be a special room, or even just a certain chair or corner.

Susanna Wesley, the mother of John and Charles Wesley raised a large family. She was virtually never alone, and her house was always noisy. But she frequently pulled her apron over her head and prayed. That was her way, and her place, for setting aside the distractions and focusing on God.

So choose a place. Make it a place free of distraction. A place where there are no screens, no phones, no busy streets or sidewalks to catch your attention and distract you from God. Let your family know that while you are there, you would appreciate them leaving you alone. And then make a regular appointment with God to meet with Him in this special place.

* **Make a vow of silence.**

Most of us cannot imagine moving to a monastery and not talking for days or weeks at a time, but perhaps we could benefit from shorter periods of time when we are simply silent. Gary Thomas writes: “Our needless chatter often dissipates our energy and scatters our thoughts from a focus on God. Trying to be silent for just a few hours will reveal how distracted we have become…if we give it time… most of us will not only grow comfortable with silence but fond of it as well.”

Some might be in a position to take a weekend to go away and be completely alone. Call one of the area camps and inquire about renting a cabin for a day or two. Others might try for an afternoon or an evening. Make the proper arrangements with those who absolutely need to know what you are doing, and then just be quiet before the Lord.

The second action of solitude is being still.

***As with the Richest of Foods***Then, the third act of solitude is the **Discipline of Denial.** If solitude is about limiting distractions, then one of the ways we can do that is by intentionally eliminating some distractions from our lives. Specifically, I’m thinking of the discipline of fasting.

Psalm 63 does not directly talk about fasting, but it hints at it in **verse 5:**

**5**I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods;
    with singing lips my mouth will praise you.

The Bible frequently makes the connection between God and food. Just as our bodies crave food, so our souls should crave time spent with God. And so, people have often used times of skipping meals to direct their attention to God.

Jesus practiced fasting. **Luke 4:1-2:**

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, **2**where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.

A couple of things about fasting: this is not about earning extra credit with God because He somehow takes delight in our suffering. Sometimes we get the impression that the more we deny ourselves food, the more impressed God must be with us. This is what Jesus was getting at when He took the Pharisees to task for making a big show of their fasting. It’s not about impressing God, or other people, with how tough we are.

Instead, the point of fasting is to redirect our hunger toward God. If you don’t eat, your body is going to let you know that it is hungry. That’s natural. And the practice of fasting is about letting those natural hunger pains prompt us to put our attention on God. The time you would normally spend eating then becomes time spent in prayer.

And, of course, you can fast from things in addition to food. If the whole point of solitude is to limit distractions, then this idea of fasting is almost subversive. What you do is take the things that would normally get your attention, and discipline yourself to turn to God instead of towards that thing or activity. So if you go on a fast from television, then that time when you would normally be turning on your favorite show instead becomes time for meeting with God. If you go on a fast from social media, then the time that would normally be spent scrolling through your notifications becomes time spent in prayer. And so on.

In the process of spending more time with God, we also learn some things about what commands our attention and how dependent we have allowed ourselves to become on those things.

So here are a couple of suggestions for things you can do to practice the discipline of denial:

* **Give up something for Lent.**

We are currently in the season of Lent. On the church calendar, it is the 40 days not counting Sundays that lead up to Easter. One of the traditions of Lent is to imitate the 40 days Jesus spent in the desert by giving up some luxury during this time. It is common in the Roman Catholic Church, but we are not Catholic; so we don’t usually make a big deal of the practice. And, of course, we are now about halfway through Lent this year.

But it is a good practice, and something you could learn a lot from. We still have about 24 days left. Maybe you could choose something that you have identified as a distraction in your life and give it up. Maybe it’s a certain food, maybe it’s a certain drink, maybe it’s a game on your phone, maybe it’s a television program. Maybe you commit to give it up for the next 24 days: not to torture yourself or punish yourself, but so that when you would normally be prompted to do that thing you will instead turn to God.

* **Give up a meal or two.**

Try a literal fast from food. Not for 40 days. Not necessarily for multiple days or even a whole day. If you have never fasted for spiritual purposes before, start simple. Give up supper. Spend the time you would normally be eating in prayer. Avoid the temptation to snack, use the hunger pains to direct you towards God. Nearly all of us can manage to skip one or two meals with no physical harm done to us, we do it before medical procedures all the time. It can be powerful what we learn about ourselves when we let ourselves become hungry.

* **Try a technology fast.**

Finally, I’ll finish where I started. The whole point of solitude is to limit distractions in order to rest in God’s love. There isn’t much doubt that one of the biggest distractions in our world is our technology. Social media. Our cell phones. Our games and our shows and our news feeds.

So do an honest assessment of your life: is technology a distraction? Could you benefit from a day or two without your phone? Is there an app that is dominating your life? Can you imagine living without it? If you can’t, maybe you should try.

Engagement. That’s what the internet companies want. Maybe instead of engaging with them, we need to return to engaging with God.

Let me challenge you to find a little solitude with God this week.