

[Practicing Faith E1]

[Speaker in the audio file: Tim Mackie]

[EMSB theme fades in]

Hey everybody, I'm Tim Mackie, and this is my podcast, "Exploring My Strange Bible." I am a card-carrying Bible history and language nerd who thinks that Jesus of Nazareth is utterly amazing and worth following with everything that you have. On this podcast, I'm putting together the last twenty years' worth of lectures and sermons where I've been exploring the strange and wonderful story of the Bible and how it invites us into the mission of Jesus and the journey of faith. And I hope this can all be helpful for you, too. I also helped start this thing called BibleProject. We make animated videos and podcasts and classes about all kinds of topics in Bible and theology. You can find all those resources at bibleproject.com. With all that said, let's dive into the episode for this week.

[EMSB theme fades out]

Well, this is the first of a three-part series that represents teachings I did a number of years ago on key practices that have marked the lives of followers of Jesus throughout history, and also in all different traditions of the church. And that's because these are life habits and practices that we find advocated [for] and practiced by Jesus and the apostles, going back to the earliest roots of the Christian movement.

And so this life habit—the teaching is called Solitude and Community—most people are familiar with the practice of—if I'm a follower of Jesus, it's important that I should be connected to a group of people who are also trying to follow Jesus. It's called "church" or "community."

But also in the New Testament, we find advocated a commitment both to being with other people in a church community, but also its opposite: to regular rhythms of being alone and having times of solitude. So what is that practice all about and why is it? And this teaching particularly focuses on Jesus's *own* habit of having times of solitude to get away for prayer and reflection.

And so if you've ever read the stories about Jesus, you know that this was a regular practice that he did. So I put all those passages together. We kind of read them and think about how many times it's mentioned in the stories of Jesus that he withdrew from

the crowds and went away to be by himself for a period of time before re-engaging. So what's that about? What value did Jesus find in times of solitude? And what value has this habit served in the lives of followers of Jesus all across the globe and all throughout history?

So this message, for the most part, focuses on the solitude habit of this balanced pair of solitude and community. I hope this teaching is helpful for you. It surely was for me in helping me form some new life habits of having a practice of solitude more often in my life. So anyway, I hope this is helpful. Let's just dive in and explore together.

[Musical Break (3:05—3:12)]

In this series, called “Spiritual Symmetry”—it's about the practice of the biblical and historic habits and practices that have marked the lives of God's people in a journey of growth and transformation and maturity. And so you may be familiar with this tradition—you know, they're called spiritual disciplines or spiritual practices or habits, but that's what this series is all about. And it has a couple sources of inspiration, you know. It's a passage from Paul's first letter to Timothy, and the way it talks about being a “follower of Jesus” is language that many of us would not often use.

He writes this to Timothy. He says, "Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales. Train yourself in godliness. For while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way because it holds promise for both the present life and the life to come. This saying is sure. It's worthy of full acceptance. This is why we labor and strive because we have set our hope on the living God who's the savior of all people, especially those who believe."

There's a whole bunch of things to unpack here. I just want to put on the table, again, what Josh put on the table last week. In other words, what Paul's writing to Timothy is that growing and transforming as a Christian isn't just going to happen to you. It won't just happen. You actually have to put some thought and intention and actual effort. He uses the word “exercise” as in what people do in gyms to train their bodies. And he talks about: that it's actually not going to be simple. It's going to require a serious sense of commitment. It's like labor, and it's striving.

Real, practical reasons for doing a series like this are generated from a question that you would ask about this. It's a question like, “Why is it that in any period of church history, and even at the present, why is it at Door of Hope—that there are many people who say they're Christians, but if you actually look at how they live . . . You look at the choices that they make and the way they treat people, and their relationships, and their

work ethic, and their daily habits, and so on, you actually look at that, and you're like, "Oh, like, that really doesn't reflect Jesus very much at all. And it doesn't seem like this person is changing, yet they are very insistent that they're a Christian. Like, what's going on? Why does that happen?"

And that happens for a lot of different reasons. One of them is that, apparently, becoming a Christian is a lot more involved than just a mental activity—like, I look to Jesus, and I get the “get out of jail free” card, and then it's, like, over or whatever. And then it's just kind of like, “grin and bear it” for the rest of your life, or something like that. There's something a whole lot more involved.

And the reason why many people who say they're Christians don't end up growing or changing is because, apparently, they just simply don't intend to. There was actually never a plan or an intention to follow Jesus in the first place. And—or maybe there was an intention, but it got lost pretty quickly. And you see there's no intention to follow Jesus over the long haul, and—notice the motivation, and what's the whole purpose?

Why would we even seek to train and to labor and to strive—and look at the last sentence right there, it's because “we've set our hope on the living God who is the Savior.” It's precisely a response to this great salvation offered to me in Jesus that I look towards Jesus, I give my faith towards him, and then I get to work. I get to work—not to make the baby Jesus smile upon me, but precisely because the baby Jesus has smiled upon me, and a whole lot more. He hasn't just smiled at me. He's actually gone to die my death on my behalf and to be raised on my behalf, too.

And so this is a very practical reason. Many of us don't grow because we actually, if we think about it, we don't intend to. We don't have an intention of overhauling our lives over the next few decades so that I actually begin to experience the empowerment and presence and life of Jesus more in my day-to-day life.

Another inspiration, the book on what this whole series is about—I think that Josh read it a number of years ago, and that I read in preparation to, kind of, get my mind going. It's by a guy named Dallas Willard. Have you guys heard of Dallas Willard before? He was actually a professor of philosophy at the University of Southern California. And, like, in his late seventies and eighties, he just started writing about his reflections on the practice of following Jesus in day-to-day life.

And he was one of these great figures where no one knew about him through, like, his most productive years of his life. And it's precisely in his retirement years, the latter end of his life, that he ended up having a huge impact on the church and in the kingdom.

And he has written what I think is one of the most accessible, compelling, thoughtful books on this whole area of spiritual practices and spiritual disciplines. And so, of course, shameless plug, we're selling them at the book cart. I can't recommend it more

highly because I've been so personally challenged . . . Actually, when Josh first pitched the idea of this series to me, I was really nervous about it because—I'll be relentlessly honest, yet again, for another week—so you know, teaching a series like this, like Josh and I are going to do on the classic spiritual practices—because we're teaching them, it might create the illusion that we actually, like, have “arrived,”—right?—in these areas of our lives.

And so like, let's just dispel that notion really quick. Like, I need to grow in many of these things that we're going to explore over the next month and a half as well. And I'm just speaking personally: this book has been a huge kick in the seat of my pants to really not get me to just think, but to actually begin a plan for how I'm—how I'm going to attack this.

And so Willard gives a great illustration right at the very beginning about this whole thing of how many people, like, say they're Christians, but they don't actually intend to follow Jesus. And he uses this example of looking at someone who's an expert or has become, like, a star performer in their field.

So just think with me, you know, an example, like: so you're going to—some of you—Sunday night in Portland, there's always a good show or two going on Sunday nights in Portland. There's some concert—some of you are going to a concert tonight, and you're going because you know about this person's music. Or you know there's going to be someone there that you want to be around, but that's a whole other topic of conversation, right?

So, but you're—there's a show, or there's a concert, and you're going there. There's a musician, there's a group, or there's one, you know—this guitar player and he or she's this virtuoso and, like, you love their music, and you've been listening to it, and you're going to watch them in person. And it's this inspiring—some of you have been to shows like this—it's just mesmerizing, and they're either full of intrigue, and they're incredible, and they have all the skill, and you are so moved by the experience that you walk away going, “I have to start playing the guitar. Like, how can I *not* start playing the guitar? At least like I need to attempt and try.”

And so tomorrow one of you might, like, go to the guitar store, or whatever, and you, like—it—you're kind of like, “training wheels guitar,” and, “this is what I'm going to use.” And the next two weeks you're, like, all into your chord charts, or whatever. And you learn, you know, “Sweet Child O' Mine” riff, and this kind of thing. So you do that whole thing, and then you're so inspired, you're like—maybe you have a rental house, or you have a little courtyard in your apartment— “I'm going to do a house show to, like, share with my friends all of the stuff that I'm learning.”

And so two weeks from now, you hold a house show—and how is this going to go for you? This is Willard's example—I'm fudging it a bit, but—so how's this house show going to go for you? It's going to be a total flop. It's going to be a complete flop. If you have kind friends, they're going to humor you and be like, “Oh,” you know, “that's a good try.” You know, “That's noble. We're glad you're finally doing something with your time,” or something like that. But you know, so it might be noble or whatever, but it's a flop.

And Willard says what's going on there. A simple kind of thing. It seems silly. He thinks that that's no different than how many of us think about what it means to be a Christian. We're inspired by Jesus. We're moved by him. We think that there's something compelling that he has to offer, that he's a model or an example. And so then we look to what we call his “moral teachings” or his “ethical teachings,” and we think, “Yes, that's what it means to follow Jesus. I'm going to, like—I've got the supervisor at work who barks at me all the time and I'm going to start forgiving them and, like, praying for them. And instead of, like, barking back at them, I'm going to, like, be really nice to them,” or something like that. And you know—whatever—be generous to them.

And so Willard's whole point is like, “Good luck with that.” Good luck with that. You might be moved and inspired to do that, like, for a week or two. But what we're talking about is an issue of your deep character. You didn't come to be someone who, like, snaps back at meeting people quickly overnight. You all are—we're decades in the making. The current state of our character and our values and our commitments and how we think about relationships, that's decades in the making.

And the moment, or the season or process through which I give my allegiance and place my faith in Jesus as the one who saves me and who's making me new—that can happen in a short or over, you know, a condensed period of time. But there is some season where there's a transition of change. But don't think that the reshaping of your character is going to happen overnight. It wasn't made overnight. And what you're committing yourself to is this long-haul process.

And so what Willard equates these moments of loving those who hate you—we're being crazy-generous or forgiving people when there's no rational reason for doing so—he likens these to moments on the stage. These are moments that are relatively few in our day-to-day lives. And they're moments where there's a crucial decision. And what matters is what has gone into the making of your character over the hours and the days and the years that lead you up into these moments. It's what you should have been doing and why you should have put off the “house show” for two years, you know what I'm saying?

Because what you needed to do was train your muscle memory and develop new muscles in your fingers and forearms to be able to do that on the guitar. You need to learn your chord charts or whatever you need to develop callouses, and you need to

have a plan for doing so. You don't just become a guitar virtuoso because somebody bonked you on the head or something, or because you had very noble intentions and were inspired at a concert. It happens because you're inspired, and then you actually set a plan in motion.

And it seems to me like that's exactly what Paul is talking about here. You don't just *happen* to train yourself. You train yourself because you have a vision and a goal, and then a source of power to actually, like, do a plan. And what is that plan? What is it? Loving your enemy is not a plan. Loving your enemy is something that will happen naturally, as a result of your life going into a whole new set of training and habits, different from the training it had before you were a Christian—that's the whole point here. That seems to be Paul's point. That's Dallas Willard's point. And that's what we're exploring in this series.

So what we're going to do is explore half a dozen—six practices or habits that are pervasive throughout the Scriptures, through the lives of Jesus and, historically, throughout the history of the church. And the six—we'll just kind of throw them out today. The rest of today, we're going to be talking about solitude and community, serving and being served, fasting and feasting, resting and working, praying and acting, giving and receiving.

And we've called the series “Spiritual Symmetry” because these are all practices. But you notice some of them are in tension with each other. So like, am I supposed to have like celebratory feasts and have food with my friends, or am I supposed to not eat any food at all? Well, it depends on the season of life that you're in. It takes wisdom to know whether to fast or to feast. And the fact is that hardly any of us fast anyway. And so what's going on with—why don't we do that? Both about balance and recognizing [that] we need to train ourselves into new ways of living.

Learning is one way of growing as a follower of Jesus, but it is not the only way where—we're mind and body. It's all entwined, and we need to grow as holistic human beings. So that—Josh gave, you know, a whole message—sales pitch. That's my, like, ten-minute sales pitch at the beginning of the series here.

Solitude and community is what we're going to explore for the rest of our time. And just to put it out there, as—as I kind of thought and talked with people about it, I'm exploring more the theme, the practice of solitude today, because I'm pretty sure that's the one that more of us are lacking in our lives. Why don't you grab a Bible and turn with me to the gospel of Luke, the third book in the New Testament—the Gospel of Luke, chapter 4.

All of the Gospels are telling the story of the life and specifically the last few years of the life of Jesus—his entry onto the public stage, his ministry and mission, his death, and

his resurrection. And each of the four Gospels highlights different themes about the life and the story of Jesus. And a really interesting one, specific to the gospel of Luke, is a constant highlighting of Jesus's practice of solitude. And it begins right here in chapter four.

Chapter four comes right after a story that we looked at a few times in the previous series of Jesus's baptism, which is kind of his entrance onto the public scene. And it's the whole thing with the voice of the Father from Heaven and the Holy Spirit as a dove. And he's declared to be the Son of God for everyone around. What's the first thing that Jesus does as he moves into this new season of his life? There's this very public moment, and he's about to go into this mission of announcing and bringing the kingdom of God into being. What's the first thing he does?

Chapter four, "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, he left the Jordan, and he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness"—which, you might think: desert and sand dunes, or whatever. The wilderness in the Bible is primarily defined by the fact that nobody lives there. It's the place where nobody lives, or [a place that cannot] sustain normal life.

So he goes into utter isolation in the wilderness and "for forty days he was tempted or tested"—some of your translations have, "by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry." Like, of course, it's a long time of not eating.

Now there's a number of things going on here. We're going to explore fasting together in a couple of weeks, but pay attention to this. The first thing Jesus does. He doesn't, like, go out to Jerusalem and announce his vocation and who he is. Instead, he withdraws from everybody and he goes to be by himself for what seems like a *really* long time. Like, this is really intense. We would think if your friend did this, you would be really concerned about them—you know what I'm saying? It'd be like a weird—and you would call their family and maybe some professionals and so on. They went off to the desert for forty days. This is really intense, and it's what Jesus does. He cuts himself off from everybody.

And in this place of isolation and solitude, he has this very intense confrontation with the personal presence of evil. What the personal presence of evil, as the devil, comes to him—it gets him to begin to doubt and plants these questions that doubt his vocation and identity and who he is; what he came to do. The whole point is that he enters into this, intentionally led by the Holy Spirit.

Turn the page to chapter five. He comes back from the desert, and he begins announcing the kingdom. He's bringing God's healing into the lives of people he's beginning to teach. And in this case of chapter five, he heals a man whose skin is riddled with disease. And because of it, the news spreads.

Look down at verse fifteen of chapter five. It says, “The news about him spread all the more so that crowds of people came to hear him and they came to be healed.” And, all this momentum—people are traveling from long distances—and what is Jesus's response? “He often withdrew to lonely places, and he prayed.”

Now, again, this is another practice we're going to explore in a few weeks, too—the practice of prayer. But notice how all of these are combined here: solitude, fasting, and prayer. They're kind of this matrix that's connected with each other. But just again, the same pattern here. We have a very public moment in Jesus's life. And his response is to get out of there—right?—is to withdraw.

Now, we know it's not just because he doesn't like people. We know he really loves people. And somehow these times of solitude, we're told—how often did he go into solitary places? A silly question. It says often. *Often*. This is a regular practice. That's what Luke's telling us here. This was something that marked Jesus and that people noticed about him. He's out there. He's doing all these incredible things. But then, like, just when you would think the momentum is going, and there's all these people he, like, pulls out, and he just disappears for a while. And then he comes back.

And when Jesus comes back, as you read through the Gospel of Luke—whenever he comes back, something momentous and significant always happens right afterward. In this case, it's forgiving another man, and a really big controversy he has with the religious leaders.

Flip the page again—in chapter six. Chapter six begins with Jesus in another controversy with the religious leaders and the Pharisees. And they are so ticked at him, they began to realize they need to, like, put together a plan to do away with this guy. Look at verse eleven of chapter six: “The Pharisees and teachers of the law, they were fierce with Jesus and they began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus.” So he is now realizing there's a target on his head or on his back. So what do you do when you receive your first death threat—right—in the mail? You know? What's your response?

And Jesus' response is, “On one of those days after that controversy, he went out to a mountainside to pray.” He spent the whole night praying to God. And then what's the next thing that he does is: he comes back from that, apparently with some kind of discernment about the next thing that he should do. And what he does is: he appoints the twelve disciples, and they become this extension of his ministry out into Israel.

So Jesus, he withdrew regularly. And we see that these are key places where there's something really important happening here for Jesus in these moments. They seem to sustain him and empower him. And here, this is a time where Jesus is even processing

through what to do in light of these circumstances. And he leads him to make this new decision of appointing the twelve.

Turn forward again, a few pages to chapter nine with me. Chapter nine has the well-known story of Jesus feeding a whole crowd, a few thousand people, from a really small amount of food. And in verse eighteen, what does Jesus do? After this huge public event, everybody's like, "Holy cow—Jesus. This guy's incredible." And verse eighteen, right after that, we're told, "Once when Jesus was praying in private . . ." Again, he's in private after these public moments, but his disciples are with him. And so he asked them a question—but even just think about that.

So he has this regular practice of just being totally by himself. But apparently he's also developed this practice of being by himself with other people, of being "alone together." So whether they're going as a group to an isolated place and then they're praying, like, separate from each other, or maybe together—probably both are happening.

And then what happens? He asked them, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" This moment in the story is one of these key moments where Peter begins to really say out loud what everybody's thinking, namely that, "Holy cow, like—you're the Messiah. You're the son of God." It's this really important conversation that happens right after another night in prayer. Do you see the point? All right. Do you see the pattern here?

Luke is trying to tell us that this is a *crucially* important part of Jesus's *own* practice. Now you might be thinking, "Well, like, he's Jesus. So he does stuff like that. You know, Jesus prays a lot. I'm not learning anything right now. You know, so I—and of course, like, what does that tell me about me? That, whatever, I'm lame because I don't pray a lot, but I'm not Jesus, and so—" But no. So stop it. Stop it.

Once again, because what you're doing is you're equating, "Oh, what it means to follow Jesus is to follow his ethical teachings." But Jesus envisioned that people could become the kind of people who could emulate the new humanity that he made possible, but not just by following those, but by actually following the pattern of his whole way of life. That's why he's inviting his disciples to come do this with him. He actually said as much. He actually expected and taught that his disciples, or people who say that they're Christians, would actually adopt this practice themselves.

Look at Matthew chapter 6, and he just says it straight up to his disciples. He says, "When you all pray, don't be like the hypocrites. They love to pray, standing in the synagogues and on the street corners, to be seen by others. Truly, I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father who is unseen."

So Jesus has in mind that his followers are also adopting—you could put it in different ways—but they're adopting his spiritual practices, the kinds of habits that he engaged in

that empowered and sustained the kind of Spirit-empowered life that he was living. Now, he was doing it on our behalf, yes, in a way that you and I will always be a flawed and, kind of, a failed imitation of. But that doesn't mean we're not supposed to train ourselves to actually begin to do it.

Somehow, we have it in our minds that, like, "Oh, Jesus is incredible. He did what I could never do for myself. Therefore, I'm never even going to try." And that's just completely wrong-headed, because Paul says, "Train yourself into this new way of life because of the hope that you have set on the living God who is your savior." He saved you into this whole new way of living. That's how Jesus seems to envision things. And so Jesus totally expects that his followers are going to engage in this kind of regular practice of solitude.

Now, what is Jesus doing when he's by himself? And what is it that his followers, like, pray? So you go in, close your eyes, and you just talk all night long in your head? Out loud? Like, how is that supposed to work? So we'll talk about that in a few minutes. But the point is there. Are you guys with me here?

So for one reason or another, if I don't sense the presence of Jesus in my life—if I don't have a sense of any kind of vital connection to him that's informing how I make my day-to-day choices, and how I treat people, and what's wrong, like, what's going on here? I have conversations like this with lots of you, and I've had seasons like that in myself.

And about the first question—let's just say, at an initial cup of coffee, one of the first questions that I'm going to ask you is, like, "Oh, where are you at in this practice of intentionally withdrawing from other people to sit—how—and do something that cultivates a relational connection with you and Jesus?" And if your answer to that is, "Oh, like, I've never done anything like that" or "I don't do anything like that," then, you know, I'll at least just say, "Okay, well, try. I mean, try."

Jesus apparently thought this was so central. I mean, Luke just tells us over and over and over again. And he said it was so central that he actually, like, told us that this is a crucially important part of the shaping of our character. You will actually find it nearly impossible to follow Jesus—apparently, Jesus thinks—if you don't have some practice of getting by yourself and having the only input and focus of that moment be something to do with Jesus. And we'll talk about what that something is. But you guys with me here? I'm just trying to make it as clear as possible.

And so again, some of us think, "Well, why should I have to be about a ritual or practice? Isn't Christianity about the erasing of rituals and so on?" Apparently not. Apparently not. So if by "ritual" you mean some kind of, like, lifeless practice that you do that ceases to have any meaning for you whatsoever, then that's clearly not what's going on here.

But the whole point is humans—we're habitual creatures. We are shaped by our habits. You have a whole bunch of habits, and you just don't know it because they're just normal to you. And if following Jesus is going to become second nature—a new nature—it's also going to be by the adoption of new habits in our lives. For some of us, I know this is a hard sell, you know. Or it's like, you will agree with me mentally, just like I have agreed with this practice many times, but you don't actually do it because sleep is just too precious to you, you know, or whatever.

So like, what's the value of this? If you read the story of Jesus, what does it seem like is happening in Jesus? If you read the book of Acts and Paul's letters, Paul talks about this practice in his life. If you read the stories of these people, like, what is it that they seem to have found by this practice?

There's two things, at least that I can discern in the Gospels and in Paul's letters that I'll just kind of riff on for a minute. And I will say, as I mentioned earlier, like just because I'm teaching on this, don't assume that I've arrived. I will say, probably in the last five years of my life, I've had the—probably—one of the biggest personal transformations in my own journey of following Jesus in precisely this area. It's been a game-changer in my own life, which is why I was excited to talk about it.

There's something about getting by yourself that's about focus. And this is very intuitive. Like this won't be—I don't think—very difficult for us to understand. So think of a situation that you've been in before, probably. Let's say you're driving. How many of you have been driving before? So let's say you're really in an engaged conversation. You're in a super engaged conversation while you're driving, and you miss your key turn. Anybody? Right, you've done this before. What's happening right there? And this is very simple, but it's really important to pause and reflect on what it means to be a human being, right?

So what's happening is: you have this acoustic stimulation, right? You have this conversation, and your brain is interpreting, literally, your brain is interpreting this energy coming in through the vibrations on your eardrum. And that's how, remember, that's how sound works, and so on. And so your brain's active, and it's giving resources to interpreting that. But then, all of a sudden, you need to focus on this visual stimulation and interpreting the five corners at Twentieth and Division, and—“which one am I supposed to take,” and so on. And how is this? So you have this new visual information and stimulation, and then you have acoustic stimulation—your eyes and your ears.

Now, how are they connected to each other? We're not learning anything right now, but it's just—remember, like, they're connected to each other through your brain. And this, I was reminded of recently—there's something funky that went on with my neck, and I learned a whole bunch about the nervous system.

So we have these, you know, these five senses, you know: sight, touch, taste, smell, and hearing, and so on. And they're all giving information to our brain through this thing we call "the nervous system." And the nervous system is a limited-capacity highway. It's the information highway. It's like where I-5 meets I-84, right? Given the population of the city, it's a ridiculously constricted and limited-sized road.

And that's what our nervous system is. We have a finite number of resources that our brain can give to paying attention to anything at any given moment. This is why—I'm just full of them today—this is why, if you go when it's on one of these eighty-degree days this week—if you go into your freezer and you get an ice cube and you go into a quiet room and you just hold the ice cube—have you ever held an ice cube in your hand? It's terribly painful. It's terribly painful, right? And you just, like . . . quiet room, and you just stare at the ice cube melting in your hand—it's nearly unbearable after about thirty seconds. But, no joke—seriously—if you go, if you have three friends with you, all of you grab an ice cube, and then you go out and walk around the block together like talking vigorously. It will actually hurt less. It will hurt less. You won't feel it nearly as much.

What's going on there? The ice cube didn't get warmer, you know? It didn't get warmer. The highway is jam-packed, right? It's like [a] parking lot on your nervous system. And so your brain actually can't interpret as much pain as it would if you were solely focused on an ice cube. You guys with me here? It's a silly illustration—well, no, it's not a silly illustration. It's reality. It's accepting the fact that you and I have a limited amount of things that we can focus on in our lives, and in any given moment. It's just true.

And some of us live as if that's not true. And you're frying your personality. You're just going to be a burnt-out seventy-five-year-old by the time you—never having focused on anything. If you're going to say "yes" to becoming a guitar virtuoso, you end up having to say "no" to all kinds of different things, because you have a plan of how you're going to get there, and "listen, it doesn't include *this* and *this* because I need to give my time to *this*." And it's absolutely no different.

This is about creating moments in our lives on a regular basis where you have absolutely no stimulation whatsoever coming your direction, so that you can discern the presence and the person and the reality of Jesus in your life somehow. It's just creating a space of quiet. Apparently, if I can't do that, it's going to be nearly impossible for me to grow as a follower of Jesus, according to Jesus, right? It's just part of what you do as following him.

And paradoxically, here's the thing is—so you're focusing. You're saying no to a whole bunch. But at the same time, this practice of solitude gives an enormous amount of freedom because here's what happens when you're by yourself. You're just sitting there, unadorned. You don't have to impress anybody. A huge amount of what we say or do

when we're around other people is that we're saying certain things. We're acting a certain way, we're dressing a certain way, precisely to manage the perceptions of other people.

And this is just how we live our days. I'm constantly, kind of, managing what you think about me, and I'll say this because they'll think I'm competent, and I'll say this because then people think I'm a funny, nice person to be around. And this is how we act. We're constantly under these social pressures to be and do certain things so that people will see and think certain things about us. And solitude *fre*es you from that. It's creating a space in your life where you actually don't have to be or do anything. You're just with Jesus. And your sole goal in that moment is to be freed from the noise of whatever in your life, and to focus on Jesus.

These have been enormously helpful—at least for me—motivators in understanding what I'm doing and why I'm going to get less sleep tonight because I'm going to wake up and do this. And paradoxically, the way to become more human is by saying no to any other kind of human interaction at regular intervals in our lives. That might seem weird to you because you're like, “Well, I love to be around people.” Well, exactly. Probably exactly why you need to do this, right?

Because there's probably a whole bunch of stuff happening inside of you and me, because—why is it that you feel like you have to be around people all the time? Is being alone scary for you? And what's going on with that? And why is it that you feel scared to be alone by yourself, especially if you believe that you're in the presence of Jesus? What's going on? There's something really significant there if you're scared to be alone with Jesus. And there might be some of you who are on the opposite end. You're kind of introverts, and you like to be alone a whole bunch. And so this is about being alone, but with a whole new and different kind of purpose.

So if this is its purpose—free myself from noise and interference and to create a space where I don't have to be anything for anybody, I'm just with Jesus—what am I doing? What was Jesus doing with this time? And this is where the Gospels just give us tiny little hints. One of the hints is that in a number of these prayer moments, specifically the practice of solitude, if you read the gospel of Matthew, you'll notice that in those moments, sometimes he'll come out and he'll have a conversation with his disciples and he'll just speak lines from the book of Psalms.

And actually, if you just read through any of the Gospels, you'll notice how much Jesus constantly quotes from, and has the book of Psalms, like, clearly in the back of his mind. Clearly, he had the whole thing memorized—absolutely. And this was standard practice in Jewish education and so on: to memorize huge amounts of the Scriptures. But the book of Psalms was the prayer book of Judaism in Jesus's day. And it actually has been the prayer book of the church, historically, from Jesus, for centuries since. It's actually

only in recent centuries that the book of Psalms has had a much lower role to play in Christian worship gatherings and so on.

So what was Jesus doing? And I think what Jesus was doing was what all Jews did when they prayed, and it was a form of prayerful meditation on the Scriptures themselves. It wasn't reading the Bible, and it wasn't simply just praying, although I think, probably, at times, it involved both. But it's a form of Scripture-inspired prayer.

How do I know this? Because the Jewish handbook of prayer that we call “the Book of Psalms” begins with a “user manual.” The first poem in the book of Psalms is a user manual about what to do with the book of Psalms and how to use this thing. And if you look in the first paragraph, this surely depicts the kind of thing that Jesus was doing regularly—look at how it begins.

It says, “How blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take, or sit in the company of mockers . . .” So the first thing we're told is about this person, called the “blessed person.” And this person, somehow, has this resolve and commitment to make really principled, difficult, moral, and ethical decisions: “Here's all of these things I'm not going to do.” You're like, “Wow, that's intense. What could sustain that? What would drive or motivate that kind of choice?” And that's exactly what follows. Here's what they don't do, because here's what they are doing: “. . . whose delight is in the law of the Lord,” referring to the Scriptures, “and who meditates on his law day and night.”

It's this regular, patterned practice of doing this—whatever that means—with the Scriptures day and night. And what's the result? This is a really powerful metaphor: “This person is like a tree, planted by streams of water.” It's like someone who is receiving this source of life from outside themselves, and it yields fruit. It actually matures into, in the poetry—interpret “fruit,” whatever you want—these are actions, these are things that this person is regularly producing in their lives because of this source that they're connected to. “And whose leaf doesn't wither”—they're able to withstand really difficult seasons because of this practice.

Now, what does this “meditate” mean? It's just very clear what that means in English, right? Meditate. That's not a clear word in English *at all*, because it's a word that has been picked up to describe the kinds of practices or spiritual practices in *many* different kinds of religious traditions. So what does it mean in the biblical tradition—in the Jewish and Christian tradition? And of course, I have to teach you the Hebrew word because that's what I do.

So it's a really good one. It's the word *hagah*. *Hagah*. Now, *hagah* is used a handful of times in Hebrew, in biblical Hebrew. And actually, the majority of times that you see this word used, it's not referring to people. It's referring to animals that are doing this. So in

Isaiah, a lion *hagah-s*—and it's particularly a lion who has just shredded a lamb to pieces and is, like, sitting there, over the meat, and the fur and stuff, and, like, beginning to eat it. And that lion is said to be *hagah-ing* over its prey.

There's a number—actually, most of the passages in the Bible that use this word are describing doves, and what doves do. And actually, what English word would you use to describe the lion doing *that* over the slaughtered little lamby? What's that? No, no. What—to describe what he's doing? The lion *hagah-s* over its prey. What would you say? Like “growl”—it's talking about the sound it's making. It's “moaning, growling” [makes growling sound], this kind of thing.

What does it mean for a dove to *hagah*? What English word do we use? In other words, this is a word that means “to mumble” or “to whisper,” or “to speak silently, or softly.” And so a lion *hagah-s* over a little slaughtered lamby. Doves *hagah* when they're up on the power lines, making noise to themselves. And humans *hagah* when they have the Scriptures in front of them, in these quiet moments that they have patterned to regularly happen throughout the day and night of their lives.

So what does that mean? Does this mean just, like, “read the Bible”—“read your Bible and pray”? This is something in between reading your Bible and then, like, praying and making a request known to God. This is a form of relational interaction with God and the Scriptures as the medium. The Scriptures—as I read them aloud to myself slowly, carefully, prayerfully—they become this way that I have an interaction with Jesus.

This is what Psalm one is referring to—and this is a way of engaging the Scriptures that's actually mentioned, quite a number of times, in the Scriptures themselves. And it seems to me this is surely one of the things, I think even one of the main things, that Jesus was doing in these moments. We were called to pray, and to read the Bible, and to *hagah*. And that this is part of the regular practice.

It's not just, like, you sit by yourself—how many of you have tried to pray and you just get utterly lost in your own thoughts, you know—and you're just, like, “Whoa, what just happened to me?” You know, like a train of association? So this, to me, has been one of the greatest gifts—is learning and adopting this practice, because you're actually focusing on something that's not your own thoughts. You're focusing on the Scriptures, but you're engaging with them, not to learn something. So that's why the book of Psalms, I think, has formed the prayer book for this practice for so many millennia now. It's because once you pray through it a number of times, it becomes familiar to you. And then it becomes the way for you to use these prayers of the book of Psalms, but to become your own prayers in some way.

Now, there's a whole other step of practice here that I don't have time to get into. But historically—in historic Christianity, this developed into a practice called, in Latin, *Lectio*

Divina, or “spiritual reading,” “divine reading of the Scriptures.” But this is about this experiential engagement with the Scriptures.

So I would say go to the book of Psalms or to a passage you are already familiar with, because the point is not learning. The point is to read this text slowly and aloud to yourself. And then to engage in the second step, that's called *Meditatio* or “meditation,” which is—the point is not to get far, the point is to focus in on some key words, key ideas, key themes in this particular passage. And then when there's something that strikes you, that resonates with you—this is important—to stop.

The point is not progress. And the point is to begin to reflect on this and say, “What?” Why is this significant right now? What does this word tell me about Jesus's character? How does this word illuminate some area in my own life, or area in my own flaws or character failures, or something like that? What does this word or concept mean for the things that are ahead of me that I know are coming later today? What is the significance of this in light of what Jesus did for me on the cross? I have a whole bunch of questions like that on the handout.

And then the next step is not to keep on reading your Bible. It's to stop. And actually use the very words from the particular passage and to turn that into a prayer that uses the same words that you just read and reflected on, and to turn that into your own prayer to God.

And then *Contemplatio* is basically “go live your life,” but go live your life shaped by the reflections and meditations that you've done from the day. And for a while, you know—at least for me—it took time. You know, it kind of felt like going through the steps. But, you know, after a while of doing it, it just becomes a pretty, sometimes even brief, but meaningful practice of a daily prayerful engagement with the Scriptures.

And I'm certain that this is exactly the kind of thing that Jesus is doing. And it's precisely the kind of thing that Jesus called his followers to be doing. It's this. It's meditating. It's *hagah*-ing on the Scriptures—not to learn something, and not just to tell God what I need. But to stop and focus, and not feel the need to have to do or say anything, but just reflect on the Scriptures and how they lead me into this engagement with the living God who is the Savior of all people—especially those who believe, as Paul said.

Now, let me just conclude. Train yourself. Strive and labor. Here we are at Sunday gathering, “Hurrah! We're going to go *do* this,” you know? And then like, “Let's have a conversation in a month,” you know? And like you're tired because you lost some sleep because you woke up earlier or whatever. And then you're like, “Is it really worth it? And I don't know. And then I went to a concert on Sunday, and it was too early to wake up, and then, whatever.” And then in a month from now, you're just like, “This never even happened,” you know what I'm saying? I think it's true of all of us.

Again, the question is, how do you gain the motivation to see that I need this? And it's not just a matter of, like, feeling guilty or, like, "Jesus did it, so I need to do it—power up." It's about a change in my desires and affection. It's about me coming to actually believe that I can't live adequately if I don't have this practice in my life. I need it. And I want it so that I'm going to focus on it and say no to other things that are going to get in the way of that.

And what—how do you get there? I don't know how you get there. Right. Let me share with you one way that has gotten me there over the last few years. Turn to Luke 22 with me. It's the last moment of Jesus's private prayer that's mentioned in the gospel of Luke. We looked at a whole bunch already, but in Luke 22, this is where it begins with Judas going out to betray Jesus and get the soldiers—hire them. Most of Luke 22 is the last supper. It's the last Passover meal between Jesus and his followers. Right as the meal concludes and they leave, look at verse 31 of Luke 22.

It says, "Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives and his disciples followed him. On reaching the place, he said to them, pray that you will not fall into temptation." Jesus knows that in a moment—he knows in twelve—within twelve hours he's going to be hanging on the Roman cross. And he says, "Pray, at a moment of decision—the ultimate moment of decision, you guys—of your allegiance to me is coming. Pray that you don't fall.

"And then he withdrew, as he always did, about a stone's throw beyond them. He knelt down, and he prayed, 'Father, if you're willing, take this cup from me, yet not my will but yours be done.'" This is a moment of agonized solitude. "An angel from heaven appeared to him, strengthening him. Being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly. His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. When he rose from prayer, he went back to the disciples,"—and he finds them doing what?

So Jesus—he's utterly alone now. He has only the Father's presence with him that he's aware of, but he is in utter solitude. Even though he has this circle of disciples around him, they're exhausted from sorrow. And so here you have this last moment of Jesus's prayer life—at least this side of the cross and resurrection—and it's a moment where his solitude—he actually wasn't trying to be alone, he went a stone's throw away, but the whole point is that they would be with him in mutual support. And he finds himself completely isolated, only the presence of the Father that he's wrestling with in an agonized prayer. The last moments of Jesus, right when he had the will to do what he thought he should do, were moments of solitary prayer, but they were also moments of abandonment by those closest to him.

To me, this is profound because that, in a way, solitude—choosing to cut yourself off from any input and relationship as a part of your regular practice—that's a form of self-

denial. So for some of us, it's very difficult to do this. It's a form of *death*, almost. It's cutting yourself off so that you identify with Jesus in his final moment of solitude.

And so Jesus goes into this moment of solitude in agonizing prayer because he knows that the cross is ahead of him. There's this moment where he's going to absorb into himself the cumulative effects, and his and the Father's own judgment on human failure and sin and selfishness, in his own death on the cross.

And it's this moment of agonizing solitude. Why did he go and do that? Why did he do that? And the witness of all of the New Testament Scriptures is that he did that as an act of love for you and for me.

Jesus entered into a moment of complete abandonment and solitude, precisely as an act of love and commitment to those who would look to him in faith, so that in their moment of solitude and death they would have the promise of never being abandoned. And so in these acts of solitude that we place ourselves into, it's a pure response to the one who is completely abandoned and isolated for me, on my behalf, as an act of love.

And in my better moments, which aren't that many, my heart is melted into a desire to want to be in solitude with my Savior. That's how I get there. I don't know how you need to get there. But it seems to me that it's only going to happen when we see that we *need* this practice, we *need* it in our lives, to actually, fully function as human beings and as followers of Jesus.

[EMSB theme fades in]

You guys, thanks for listening to the "Strange Bible" podcast. The next episode is going to follow on in this series of key spiritual practices of followers of Jesus. We'll look at "feasting and fasting," and we'll see you then. Cheers.

[EMSB theme fades out]