

Surprise The World

Week 4 ~ Chapter 5: Listen

At first glance you might think a chapter entitled “Listen” would have to do with being a good listener of other people, especially since we’ve already looked at cultivating habits of blessing others and eating with others. And while listening to others is always good—listening is loving, after all—this chapter is actually about listening to the Holy Spirit (the Divine Other, if you will).

This chapter connects well to, and brings us full circle with, the book we started the year with, *Sacred Rhythms*, by Ruth Haley Barton. In that book we spent time considering how we arrange our lives for spiritual transformation, which included such things as solitude, silence, and prayer...which is what this week’s chapter is also about.

- *What’s your experience of listening to the voice of God? How do you go about that? Or, what’s your practice for doing so? How have you been guided through it? Or, what knowledge, understanding, insight have you gained in it? How has it increased your love for others?*

While the focus of *Surprise The World* is engaging with other people in such a way that they are intrigued by our Jesus-following ways, that does assume that we are, in fact, following Jesus. This chapter is an important reminder that inward/internal habits proceed outward/external habits. Jesus did bless many people, and eat with many people, but He also spent considerable amounts of time in prayer. Luke emphasizes this point...

- *“At daybreak Jesus went out to a solitary place.”* (Luke 4:42)
- *“But Jesus **often** withdrew to lonely places and prayed.”* (Luke 5:16, emphasis added)
- *“One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God.”* (Luke 6:12)

This chapter reminds us that the Holy Spirit is our companion and our source of strength and wisdom. Our role and responsibility is to regularly/habitually turn our attention to the Spirit, so we can notice the Spirit’s Presence, activity, and guidance in our lives...in short, to LISTEN to/for the Spirit. As we do so, we’ll be better equipped to love others.

- *How have you been noticing God’s Presence and activity in your life these days? What has God guided your attention to recently?*

Frost points out that a regular habit of prayer (specifically listening prayer or contemplative prayer) will protect us from the sins of fear and laziness, which Frost calls “mission killers”. As Frost says, “...*fear and laziness will motivate you to come up with dozens of reasons why you can’t or shouldn’t open yourself to others.*”

- *How have you experienced fear and/or laziness demotivating you spiritually? How might we, your church family, help you with that?*
- *One way we can describe the Holy Spirit is as our constant Companion. Is that how you experience the Spirit/God? Or, how do you experience the Spirit in your life...how would you describe that relationship?*

Frost goes on to say, “*My experience when engaging with my neighbors is that I must open my heart to the Holy Spirit in order to separate truth from untruth, fiction from knowledge, the honorable from the dishonorable. Figuring out how best to be an intriguing, blessing, godly presence in community isn’t easy. If I’m going to encourage you to bless others and eat with them, it would be irresponsible of me not to also encourage you to listen to the Spirit...Our practice of generosity and hospitality must be intentionally nurtured and sustained by the disciplines of solitude, silence, and prayer.*” Again, inward/internal habits proceed outward/external habits.

Or to say it another way, if we pursue Jesus, if we apprentice ourselves to Jesus, we will BECOME like Jesus...who pursued other people and blessed them as guided and empowered by the Spirit. Or to frame it in a way that is hopefully familiar to us by now...

- Be with Jesus
- Become like Jesus
- Do as Jesus did

This chapter also reminds us that prayer isn’t so much about asking/requesting from God, though there’s certainly a place for that, but that mature prayer is listening to God—learning to abide in His Presence, enjoy His Presence, letting His love wash over us and reminding us who we are and Whose we are. Or, as you’re probably tired of hearing me say...but I’ll say it again anyway, “*The primary purpose of prayer is not to get God to do what we think God ought to do, but to be properly formed.*” (Credit: Brian Zahnd)

Or as Frost, quoting Thomas Merton, shares, “*...it is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers...*” The reality is, on our own we simply don’t have the resources, the internal wherewithal, to love others very well or for very long. We need what only God can provide in order to love well. So it behooves us to put ourselves in a place and posture to receive what we need.

- *What have you found to be most helpful in your journey of Becoming?*
- *How have you experienced God/the Spirit as your source of strength, wisdom, guidance, peace, hope, etc.? Or, how has God helped you love others?*

Spending time with God in silence, solitude, and prayer is a mystical experience. As we do so regularly/habitually our lives, our very being, take on a mystical quality. Others may not be able to articulate exactly what it is about us, we may not be aware of it ourselves...but they’ll notice

something different, not normal...but generally pleasing. (Biblical writers like Paul would call it the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control...see Galatians 5:22-23)

In Exodus 34 we read that when Moses would go and meet with God he would come back and his face would be “radiant”...so much so that it freaked the people out so Moses would cover his face with a veil. Now I’m not saying that if/when you spend time with God your face is going to shine/glow, but spending time with God is a key component of transformation, and there is no greater testimony to the Gospel than a transformed life.

Frost quotes Joshua and Roy Searle from the Northumbria Community, *“If we regard hospitality as a missional imperative, then our participation in the **missio Dei** [mission of God] requires that we engage in disciplined practices, such as solitude, silence and prayer that will sustain our commitment to hospitality and lend substance and authenticity to our evangelistic and missional programs.”* (emphasis added) Personally, I’m less concerned with adding substance and authenticity to programs...I’m far more interested in adding substance and authenticity to our lives, our very being. A habit/rhythm of solitude, silence, and prayer will add gravitas to our souls.

- *“Gravitas” can be described as dignity, seriousness, weightiness, or having substance. Who do you know that you would describe as having “gravitas”? Where do you think that comes from?*

Frost rounds out this chapter by giving some practical advice...much of it will likely sound familiar to you based on other material we’ve covered over the past couple of years...

- Set aside a designated time
 - Frost recommends spending one period of time with God per week. Personally, I would suggest daily, or at least regular periods throughout the week, unless you can manage a significant amount of time in one dose (like half a day...which most people can’t). I think time with God is important enough to make it a daily rhythm. How you choose to spend that time, or what you incorporate during that time, can most certainly vary. But the goal is to cultivate an ear to our Teacher’s voice.
- Eliminate distractions
 - This will vary person to person. Some people are easily distracted, others can block things out pretty easily. For example, I can go to a coffee shop and really not be distracted by what’s going on around me. But, if I’m at home and my dog is begging for my attention, that’s a major distraction. I suspect you know yourself well enough to know what you need to do in order to focus.
- Let God in
 - Personally, I recommend beginning with (and revisiting as necessary) several slow deep breaths. This is neurologically proven to prepare us, to open our minds

and hearts, to receive. I appreciate, and concur with, Frost when he says, “*After time you’ll learn to read which thoughts are God’s thoughts.*” Those who stick to this sort of contemplative practice tend to be able to discern the difference between their thoughts and the Spirit’s thoughts. I can’t fully explain it. Again, it is a mystical thing.

- Follow God’s promptings
 - The primary reason we spend time listening to God is to simply enjoy the relationship we were created for. The second reason is to actually respond to whatever leading, guidance, promptings we receive in trust and obedience. So we need to enter this time with the intent to do as we sense we’re being led. Don’t feel bad if you don’t feel “prompted” every time you meet with God, because the main goal is to simply abide with Him. But be prepared to act should you feel prompted.

- *What challenges do you face in getting time alone with God in solitude, silence, and prayer? Does having a regular time of doing this entice you or intimidate you? (We’re not looking for the “right” answer, but the honest answer. This is a safe place to be honest.)*

- *Would you say you can hear/discern/make out the Voice of God in your life? Explain. Or, how do you differentiate between your own thoughts/ideas and those of God?*

- *Describe a time when you felt prompted by God and acted upon it? Describe a time when you felt prompted by God and didn’t respond.*

In the series we just finished, *Good Politics: The BE campaign*, we reflected on Micah 6:8 which ends with, “*...and walk humbly with your God.*” “Walk” implies being with, spending time with, which sounds easy enough. But let’s face it, this is God we’re talking about. It is totally normal and natural to initially feel a bit unsettled, or even intimidated, or perhaps unworthy at the thought of spending time with God. If we are not accustomed to it, silence and solitude can be unnerving, and becoming aware of God’s Presence can make us quite self-conscious. That’s OK. Spending time with God is an acquired taste...largely due to the humility it requires. For that reason I appreciated the quote from St. Therese of Lisieux, “*If you are willing to bear serenely the trial of being displeasing to yourself, then you will be for Jesus a pleasant place of shelter.*”

Incidentally, St. Therese was a Carmelite nun, known as The Little Flower of Jesus, who died at the young age of 24. She became known for her spiritual memoir titled *The Story of a Soul*, in which she expressed her theology of the “Little Way”. One of her most famous quotes fits so well with the premise of *Surprise The World...*

“Miss no single opportunity of making some small sacrifice, here by a smiling look, there by a kindly word, always doing the smallest right and doing it all for love.”

So far in our study of *Surprise The World* we've looked at two habits of engagement (bless and eat) and now a habit we might categorize as withdrawal (listen). It is natural to feel an invitation toward, or a resistance to, practices that are more engagement oriented or withdrawal oriented based on our personalities, proclivities, and experience. But instead of letting our natural inclinations rule the day, I would encourage us to explore a bit deeper whatever we sense resistance or invitation to. There may be something to learn there; there might be opportunity to grow there.

As we continue through this book, may our prayer and goal be to BECOME "...a godly, intriguing, socially adventurous, joyful presence in the lives of others." Amen.

- *Do you feel yourself more drawn to practices/habits of engagement or withdrawal? Why do you think that is?*

Soul Training Exercise ~ Listen

Since our goal is to cultivate long standing and sustained habits, let's continue to...

- BLESS others (3 per week—or more if you'd like)
- EAT with others (3 per week—or more if you'd like)

This week let's add spending dedicated and designated time in solitude, silence, and prayer to LISTEN to the Holy Spirit.

- This can be in a quiet place in your home, or on a walk, or wherever you can turn your attention to the Spirit for a sustained amount of time. (Don't be troubled if your mind wanders—that's normal—when you realize you've lost focus simply bring your attention back to Jesus (I usually just share a chuckle with Him when I realize my mind has wandered. Sometimes we chat about what my mind wandered to.)
- Wherever you go, try to be comfortable (temperature wise; position/posture wise). It's hard to focus/be attentive if we're uncomfortable.
- Don't be overly expectant. If you don't feel, sense, hear, experience anything "spiritual", that's OK. Just bask in the knowledge that you are in God's Presence. Don't allow yourself to think/feel that you're "doing it wrong".
- Personally, I have found this to be my favorite time of the day...the part of my day I look most forward to and long for. But enjoying time with God is an acquired taste. If this is new to you, be patient and gracious with yourself. You were made for this.