

Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People sermon series
The Practice of Slowing
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You may know that I used to teach a Public Speaking course at a community college in Illinois. My favorite class was the one in which students got up in front of everyone and gave their first speech. It was terrifying for them, but I loved it because I got to see people who were deathly afraid of speaking in public overcome their fears and succeed. I saw the joy on their faces when they said their last line and realized they didn't die or pass out or vomit.

But for some, it took a lot of work to make it through that first speech. The biggest hurdle many of them had to overcome was speaking too fast. Thankfully, I never have this problem as a public speaker. In actuality, when I took my public speaking class in college, I spoke so fast during my first speech that my professor asked if I was speaking English. So for my next few speeches, I wrote at the top of each page of my text "Slow down!" so every time I turned the page during the speech, I saw the words "Slow down!"

As we continue our sermon series on "Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People," we're going to talk about one that can be a challenge for us: the practice of slowing down. That might sound ironic, since in our COVID-dominated world we have been forced in many ways to slow down. That might be true of our bodies and our schedules, but not necessarily true of our souls. As John Ortberg says, "Hurry is the great enemy of spiritual life in our day," and that's true even under the restrictions of a pandemic. Why are we in such a hurry?

I think I know why. I think I have found the culprit that has caused as this craziness. It's the microwave. Yup, the microwave oven. You see, before the microwave oven came along, there was at least one time of day that we had to slow down and wait for something. You couldn't cook macaroni and cheese in 30 seconds, you couldn't nuke a frozen dinner in three minutes, and you actually had to make popcorn on the stove! Google it, kids, it's true.

But then came the microwave. Have you thought about how much this one invention changed our culture? No more standing over a stove, no more waiting on an oven to preheat. Dinner could be cooked in minutes, not hours, freeing up precious time to fill with other time-saving activities. And do you know what innovation soon followed the microwave? Drive-thru restaurants. See the pattern? The one time of day that used to provide significant slow down – the meal – was turned into 30-second, run-and-gun, Big Mac-in-one-hand-steering-wheel-in-the-other free-for-all.

Since then, we've been culturally conditioned to be in a hurry. Everything around us tells us that we should be in a hurry, that we shouldn't have to wait. Have you thought about how pervasive that idea is in our culture? Remember the ketchup commercial with the first drop of ketchup slowly descending from the bottle? Carly Simon sang, "Anticipation, it's making me wait." That commercial wouldn't sell one bottle of ketchup now, wouldn't it? Now we have squeeze bottles so we don't have to waste those precious seconds on things like lethargic ketchup. Ortberg says we are "Internet-using, microwaving, Fed-Ex mailing, fast-food eating, express-lane shopping people."

We were promised that advancements in technology would help. The more time we saved by buying products like microwaves, the more time we'd have for leisure, for family time, for doing the things we want to do. We've been sold a false bill of goods. The time created by time-saving devices simply gives us more time to fill with busyness. I know this because I am a self-

proclaimed expert at multitasking. Ortberg says about multi-tasking, “It could be called doing more than one thing at a time, but that takes too long to say.” All my time-saving devices let me accomplish more things in a shorter amount of time. But as a loved one pointed out to me, you can never give more than 100% of your attention, and the more your attention is divided, the less you are giving to things that matter, like a loved one. We make a false correlation between our ability to do things fast and our ability to do them well.

So, the practice of slowing down may sound good, but it goes against our cultural conditioning to always be accomplishing something. And we don’t even heed the time-saving devices that are supposed to help us slow down! My Apple Watch has an app on it called “Breathe.” Through little pulses, the watch will lead you through a breathing exercise for whatever time you set. Twice a day I get a pop-up reminder on my phone from that App to breathe. And twice a day I cancel that reminder, because who has time to breathe? “Next time,” I think. “Next time it pops up, I’ll breathe.” But not now, because right now, there are things to be done. Breathing can wait.

You would think something like a pandemic might make us rethink this breakneck speed of life, and I know for many of us, it has. We’ve reprioritized the use of our time, making sure we have more time with family and friends, more time focusing on home- and self improvement. That’s great! And yet, I still think we are cursed by our conditioning to be in a hurry. The desire to hurry lies behind much of the anger and frustration in our lives. Just ask anyone who’s sitting in traffic! We get upset when things aren’t done when we want them done. As this pandemic has dragged on, we’ve become increasingly impatient that things returning to normal when we think they should, despite the continued rise in positivity rates and deaths.

While this forced slowing down may have helped us organize our closets, I’m surprised at the number of people who’ve told me this time has been detrimental to their relationship with God and the church. I know a screen isn’t the ideal way to worship, but what a gift it is to be able to worship at a time of your choosing, and then to pause worship to ponder or pray or discuss a point that was raised. We may be slowing down our bodies and our schedules, but are we slowing down our souls?

One of things I love about Jesus was he knew how to balance going fast and going slow. He was often busy, but never hurried. In our reading today, Jesus encourages his disciples to come away to a deserted place and rest, knowing the demands that have been and will be placed upon them. It’s an invitation he still offers today, but because we’re too busy saving time, it too often falls on deaf ears. Even during this pandemic, we fill our lives with things that keep us from simply slowing down and being still.

Here’s the truth, as I see it, and this may only be my truth, so if this doesn’t resonate for you, fast-forward about 30 seconds. I don’t believe we’re too busy to slow down. I believe we’re too scared. Too scared to relinquish that bit of control we think we have. Too scared that the world can’t go on without us, or even worse, that it can. Too scared that if we “waste” that time, we’ll never get it back.

But time being still isn’t time wasted. Instead, it’s time savored, time spent stepping out of the swiftly flowing stream of life to take in the small wonders and beautiful silence around us. Being still is at time to remember God is God and we are not, and we don’t have nearly as much control in our lives as we think. COVID has shown us that in stark ways, and yet I wonder if we’ll remember that lesson when life goes back to some sense of normal.

There’s a group of people from whom I think we can learn this invaluable lesson, because they practice it on a daily basis. Five times a day, faithful Muslims around the world stop

whatever they are doing, fundamentally change their posture, and kneel down in prayer. Five times a day, they hit the pause button on whatever is keeping them busy and they genuflect, kneeling as a form of submission. I can't be bothered to stop and breathe for five minutes, so what might happen if we stopped to pray for five minutes? The thought both excites and scares me, because that's giving up a lot of control.

But if we are claiming to be followers of Jesus, then we must be faithful in that following. That means not only following Jesus when he's doing something, but also when he's praying or resting or stepping away from the demands around him. Ortberg says that following Jesus can't be done at a sprint. You can't go faster than the one you are following, and many times in the gospels Jesus almost grinds to a halt in order to replenish his soul and reconnect with God.

We are so blessed that God doesn't give into our demands to work on our timetable. God is often described as "slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." One writer said we worship a three-mile-an-hour God. To be honest, I don't really think God cares much about our desire to be on time and productive. Another author put it this way: "God is under no obligation to speed up God's timetable to accommodate our urgency."

You may only have time for five minutes of stillness today, but that's enough. Or that's a start. When we slow down, we give our bodies a chance to rest, our minds a chance to be quiet, and our souls a chance to catch up. Turn off the phone, shut the door, get comfortable, and just be still. Let me warn you, you're not going to get anything done, and that might feel weird. But this time is not about what you are doing or not doing, it's about what God is doing in you. Slow down. Not just your body. Not just your mind. But your soul.