

# Do We Have Time for Quiet Time?



Jesus told His disciples, *“But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place.”* Jesus Himself often retreated from the hustle and bustle of busy ministry to quiet Himself down and pray. *“And when He had sent the multitudes away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. Now when evening came, He was alone there.”* (Mt.14:23). For the past ten years I have laid out a plan for near daily personal prayer and Bible study. For the first few years my schedule involved a set amount of time each day, Monday through Saturday, and then, gradually, a bit more each day, Monday through Friday. For me, these moments have been primarily devotional -my quiet time. It’s been quite a rich and interesting journey both in the disciplines of prayer and in the arena of self-awareness.

I typically use my computer as my platform for Bible study. As I slowly caught up to current trends in technology my phone and my computer and tablet software evolved. Before long I was ringing, dinging, and sideways-glancing as on-screen notifications poured in like rain from my now-synced devices. I realized that if I was ever going to maintain even a semblance of focus, I was going to have to turn off my ringers and my on-screen notifications. In addition to that I completely shut down both my mail and messages programs while studying the Bible from my computer. Having overcome such an egregious encroachment of the digital age into my secret place I now realized that my mind continued, on autopilot, to regularly re-hash my to-do list for the day. Over and over it cycled through my brain, like towels on tumble-dry, endeavoring to make sure I didn't forget a thing. It was plain enough to see that this wasn't going to work out well. From hand-written lists to a cloud-based format I now simply jot down the day's action-items in neat and organized fashion, even the spontaneous ones. My brain, taking its cue, is free to move on to other, more important things.

I am lucky enough to be able to work from home *and* have my own office, *with two doors* (at least these days). The first door opens and shuts to a hallway in front of my space and the second to my office itself. I've even changed one of the locks for privacy' sake. Alone, in my impenetrable fortress I am free to contemplate the Divine. Oh, yeah, except that I'm a home-school dad of eleven years and my office seems to be the hub of morning activity from September through June. On any given school-day I may be found harmonizing my algebra genius along with my vast knowledge of the technical nuances of the English language (I'm assuming you're picking up on the subtle sarcasms here) or simply helping to resolve any number of interpersonal issues between the students. Yes, my spiritual retreat also doubles during the week as a teacher and principal's office. But with the students neatly nestled back in their workspaces, problems resolved, I can now relax to the soothing sounds of nearby traffic thudding loudly along on the brick road just outside my single-paned office window. I live on a busy intersection where the city of Buffalo meets up with two smaller towns. Night and day, we accommodate multiple bus stops, streetlights, crosswalks, and thousands of cars and trucks along with a myriad of dog-walking neighbors and backpacking students making their way to the University at Buffalo, South Campus just two blocks away. I've moved from poly-something earplugs to wired headphones to blue-tooth AirPods, to good, old-fashioned sound-proof, made-for-the-firing-range, over-the-ears, tactical hearing protection to try and drown out the noise. I've found that, based on the day, and

whatever mood I find myself in, any number of these products may or may not actually work in procuring the deep sound of silence I am actually looking for.

Depending on how much sleep I've had and whether its winter or summer (my office temperature tends to fluctuate drastically) I may occasionally battle drooping eyelids as my off-kilter recliner seeks to lull me into some sort of alternate state of mind. "Focus," I keep telling myself. "Focus!" I suppose if I'm saying anything, I'm saying that I've yet to discover the optimum environment for that deep devotional connect with God I so long for. Many years ago, when my children were no older than six or so, I vividly remember studying the Bible in my living room (otherwise known as my open-air office), in a different off-kilter rocking recliner, while three of the four sat perched like pigeons on a wire, one on each shoulder, and one on my head. During those years I worked as a painting contractor and I had many hours a week to give to listening to Bible teaching and preaching on my portable CD player and my eventual iPod Shuffle (gigantic-dial model). I imagined how great it must be to be employed, full-time, in the ministry. I would study, I would pray, and I would teach -all without distraction. Needless to say, distraction is a part of life, and I dare say, a growing part of life. Jesus taught us to manage our hearts like one would manage a garden - expertly weeding it, cultivating its soil and guarding against thorns and enemies. *"But he who received seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty."* (Mt.13:23).

Currently, technology is driving an increasing trend of global interconnectivity, and information is one of the hottest commodities available. According to one online source, *"...until 1900 human knowledge doubled approximately every century. By the end of World War II knowledge was doubling every 25 years. Today things are not as simple as different types of knowledge have different rates of growth. For example, nanotechnology knowledge is doubling every two years and clinical knowledge every 18 months. But on average human knowledge is doubling every 13 months. According to IBM, the build out of the "internet of things" will lead to the doubling of knowledge every 12 hours."*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.industrytap.com/knowledge-doubling-every-12-months-soon-to-be-every-12-hours/3950>

Some large corporations focus exclusively on data-management and integration solutions so businesses and other organizations can capitalize on the rapid increase of human knowledge and how it impacts the way the average person, communicates, shops, banks and relaxes. Programs everywhere are monitoring our online choices and habits. Personal information is gathered with expert efficiency and sold to the highest bidder in order that companies and governments alike are permitted ease of access into our personal affairs. Such inundation is not only intrusive it absolutely effects the way in which we live our lives, whether we are aware of it or not. Author, David A. Noebel along with Jeff Myers, wrote in his classic work on worldviews, *“Some people try to manage the accelerating growth of information by multi-tasking. Ironically, those who constantly switch between tasks are actually less productive because each activity has its own rules and it takes time for the mind to switch from one set of rules to another. In the case of driving and texting, this literally kills people. The more than 3,000 texting-while-driving deaths each year prove that our capacity is not fast enough to switch between tasks.”*<sup>2</sup> And again, *“There is literally so much information on the internet that it distracts people from doing what they ought to do. The New York Times reports that the cost of interruptions to people’s workdays—looking at the latest video they’ve been forwarded or checking out someone’s Twitter feed—is around \$650 billion dollars a year in lost productivity.”*<sup>3</sup> That’s a lot of productivity down the drain!

It’s been my personal observation that this loss of productivity reaches far beyond the corporate sector and right into the heart of the church. Jesus warned against the encroaching danger of thorns, that is to say briery distractions, which can so easily choke out our spiritual life. *“Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful. But he who received seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.”* (Mt.13:22). Some years ago, I noticed that one of the trees in our front yard had a large fibrous vine growing right up the trunk. When I looked, though I couldn’t see exactly where it went as it spiraled upward, I was sure that even its mere presence wasn’t good for the tree. Inspired and returning from the garage, hatchet in hand, I severed the gnarly growth in two. With its life source cut I patiently waited for it to shrivel and

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<sup>2</sup> Myers, J., & Noebel, D. A. (2015). [\*Understanding the times: a survey of competing worldviews\*](#). Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

die. To my amazement it seemed as if the entire tree itself began to fade only a few short days later. Nearly every green leaf had turned a yellowish brown. Bewildered, I squinted my eyes, peered upward and examined a bit more closely. Utterly astonished, I realized that in fact neither the branches of the tree nor any of its leaves had withered whatsoever. All along what I thought were really the leafy boughs and natural growth of our tree were actually the leaves of that hideously intrusive vine! It had wrapped itself around nearly every available branch and blossomed large leaves which in turn absorbed nearly all the available sunlight leaving that poor tree very little nutrients with which to sustain its own foliage. What had once seemed to me a vibrant and healthy tree was in reality nothing but a thief and a usurper coiling its length around and around its host eventually dominating the nutrients and suffocating its growth. Now, I imagine the vine didn't start off as anything more than a small sprout somewhere near the ground posing no real threat to the tree or its leaves. Slowly, over time, it attached itself to its host, again seeming to pose no real threat, and began its upward climb toward the nutrient rich sunlight. Eventually, though, it matured and began to dominate the open space in every available branch. Jesus said that this is what happens when thorny vines invade the space of healthy garden plants, "*And some seed fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no crop.*" (Mark 4:7). He likened the cares of this world to the willful encroachment of thorns and briars.

The Greek word translated as "*cares*" in Matt.13:22 (NKJV) is the word *mērimna*<sup>4</sup>, that is, "*care or worry*". It takes its form from (through the idea of distraction) another word, *mērizō*, meaning, "*to part*", or (lit.) to "*apportion, bestow, share, or (fig.) to disunite, differ.*"<sup>5</sup> When Jesus speaks regarding the "*cares of life*" He is talking about those things that vie for our heart's allegiance. First, we give them attention, and then we give them priority in such a way that they actually begin to cause a separation between us and Him -in essence, they become distractions.

Now, distractions come in all sorts of unique sizes and shapes. Depending on your focus, they may be mental and emotional, they may be circumstantial, they may be relational or even health

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<sup>4</sup> Strong, J. (2009). *A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek Testament and The Hebrew Bible* (Vol. 1, p. 47). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

related. They may even look like your pets or your children or your spouse! But wait, there's more. In this current generation, our ability to focus on one thing for any real length of time is substantially hindered by an overload, often digital, of information and an attraction to *"whatever else might be out there"*. As reported in a June 2015 issue of the Harvard Business Review, *"Digital overload may be the defining problem of today's workplace. All day and night, on desktops, laptops, tablets, and smartphones, we're bombarded with so many messages and alerts that even when we want to focus, it's nearly impossible. And when we're tempted to procrastinate, diversions are only a click away. This culture of constant connection takes a toll both professionally and personally. We waste time, attention, and energy on relatively unimportant information and interactions, staying busy but producing little of value."*<sup>6</sup> *"Gloria Mark, of the University of California, Irvine, has shown that workers typically attend to a task for about three minutes before switching to something else (usually an electronic communication) and that it takes about 20 minutes to return to the previous task."*<sup>7</sup> In this digital age *"the industry of capturing and selling human attention"*<sup>8</sup> is king. *"In the coming years, the demands on our attention spans will likely grow, as technology enters more of our lives, from virtual reality to smart appliances."*<sup>9</sup>

The busyness of life has been real for every generation. Distraction from essential tasks and activities has also existed throughout history as a normal part of everyday life. What I'm referring to here, though, is a distinction between *legitimate* or *necessary distraction* and *unnecessary distraction*. Distraction in and of itself isn't necessarily a bad thing. For instance, some personality types are extremely task oriented and others given to long periods of profound thought essentially rendering them disconnected from the nuts and bolts of the present tense. In both cases, driven and contemplative people may need to be awakened from the blissful sleep of accomplishment and wonder in order to recognize that they may indeed be guilty of an oversight in the daily maintenance of staples like family and friendships. But Jesus, in addressing this very topic, prioritized one thing above every other thing. *"Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. And she had a*

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<sup>6</sup> <https://hbr.org/2015/06/conquering-digital-distraction>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.aarp.org/health/brain-health/info-2017/mental-focus-smartphone-use.html>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word. **But Martha was distracted with much serving**, and she approached Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore, tell her to help me." And Jesus answered and said to her, "**Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed**, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her." (Lk.10:38-42). In the hustle and bustle of very normal activity, older sister Martha becomes consumed with her work to the detriment of ignoring the very special visitor in her living room. Her cooking was necessary and quite in accord with the high value placed on both generosity and hospitality in her day. As a host she wasn't disengaged in the basement office preoccupied by some outrageous get-rich-quick scheme or some nefarious business or even a bit of renovation to the master bedroom, she was simply preparing a meal for her guests and her own household. But Jesus recognized the importance of the moment in a way that she did not. He gently communicates to her, not by criticism, but through the affirmation of her sister Mary's choice, that the priorities of God often differ from our own. And while it is true that we cannot simply just hide away and neglect our responsibilities and duties in the name of spiritual devotion we must be diligent to maintain a hunger in our hearts for His word and a commitment to the place of prayer. "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.*" (Mt.5:6)

Connectedness to Jesus is essential if we are going to maintain a vibrant Spirit and live in a way that fully pleases God. "*That you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.*" (Col.1:10). "*Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.*" (John 15:4). Our ability to interact with the Spirit is central to our abiding in Jesus. Interaction with the Spirit is critical if we are to produce good fruit with our lives. A garden plant can no more be fruitful when choked by thorns than we can when our time and emotions are suffocated by the tide of unnecessary distraction that breaks so regularly upon the shore of our doorstep each day. I have found that the upward call to know Christ has been regularly assaulted in my own life by desire for other things. My devotional prayer life is routinely intruded upon by both exterior and interior stimuli. Often times, the good that I desire to do is not what I actually do. I stay busy, sure enough, but many times with God in my periphery rather than in my sights. I know that one day I will be fully able to revel in every delightful thing ordained for me by God. With deep breaths of boundless joy I will plunge into the vast ocean of God's delight. Again and again I'll surge, ever upward, into the limitless treasury of His goodness. No tide will ever sweep me backward into the mire of lesser things, not even for a moment! But, alas, it is not today.

Today I will yearn deeply for that day as I navigate the tension of this present age and that which is to come. I will settle myself, determined, in His glorious presence, Bible opened, my heart His script. I will steel myself with a resolve that only divine grace can supply to know Him still more and more and to make Him know still more and more. It is a glorious thing, this tension. It both restrains us and compels us. Like a seed, it needs watering and cultivation, until it becomes nearly unmanageable, branches laden and dripping with the fruit born from love's true desire. Only love gives birth to love. And indeed, love springs forth from the beauty of a quiet heart. And so, again, I ask, *"Do we have time for quiet time?"*

*"Do not let your adornment be merely outward...rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God." -1 Peter 3:3-4*