

## Integrative Paper

Nathan Lee

At the start of my spiritual retreat, I realized that I was very anxious to finish the exercise, communicating to me that I truly needed to slow down and reflect on the inner machinations occurring in my life. I had repeatedly told myself that this was good for me, that it was necessary and healthy to take the time to center and focus my attention on what God had been seeking to do and communicate to me. I thought of the various responsibilities that I had waiting for me after I had finished the retreat, and that in turn brought to light my drive to do things. With that in mind, I gave myself grace and told myself that my responsibilities can wait, that this time was specifically set aside so that I might slow down and be refreshed. I had not given myself adequate time and space to reflect on my relationship with God and the challenges and lessons He was seeking to give me. I positioned myself to hear and receive from God through the Disciplines of Solitude, Meditation, and Prayer. Isolating myself to still my soul and tune my heart to God's voice was one of the best things I had experienced during the retreat. It also enabled my mind to ask God what it is I should pray for. I then took some time to quiet my mind and meditate on Scripture, with Matthew 11:28-30 coming to mind, specifically the phrase, "my yoke is easy and my burden is light". As the phrase lingered, I thought about how I had become so adjusted to a frantic pace of doing that I did not see the yoke that way. I never thought of myself staying still, let alone slowing down for even a bit. My spiritual knees and feet began to feel the exhaustion that I had ignored for so long. Right now, rest is important. I then read through Biehl's book, *Why You Do What You Do*, and it was brought to my attention that I do so much and add responsibilities to my plate because my sense of worth came from wanting to be loved and accepted unconditionally. It caused a core thought that I believed to be abandoned in college to resurface, namely, that if I am not useful, then I am worthless. Yet I was equally

challenged with this thought: if I ceased to do all that I was doing currently, whether in my church or at my work, would God's love for me decrease? Granted, I knew that intellectually, but emotionally and spiritually, it could not be farther from the truth.

For the second spiritual retreat, I focused on my reflections on Neil Anderson's booklet *The Steps to Freedom*. I am not quite used to making declarative statements as they relate to spiritual warfare. The traditions I grew up with did not encourage the use of declarations. I often had the impression that utilizing such statements was presumptuous of God's purpose and authority for my own ends. However, I forget that the body of Christ has been given the Spirit to empower and dwell in believers, and that the same power that raised Christ from the dead is within us. A challenging portion I had struggled with was proclaiming forgiveness for others I feel resentment towards. I did not think that simply stating that I forgave those that hurt me would have any impact, but I was humbled to learn that forgiveness is a proactive choice where we intentionally decide to release any need for retribution or apologies from the offenders, giving it to God. Leaning on God's forgiveness as my basis, I am continually surrendering to Him the temptation to withhold forgiveness in my heart. The other exercise I had resistance to was releasing to God my struggle with pornography. I have often turned to pornography as a source of comfort, using it as a means to dull my feelings of loneliness and unfulfilled desires. I recognize that surrendering to God the means of comfort that we fall back on, sinful or not, requires a yielding to God and a desire for Him above all else. Truly understanding God as the source of all joy, fulfillment, purpose and belonging has been an ongoing process for me. Engaging in these exercises has caused me to reflect on denying oneself for Christ's sake, and that Christ desires to break us free from the chains of our sinful nature..

Before taking this course, the practice of regular times of stillness before the Lord was unknown to me. Going through Guyon's book instilled in me a greater desire to press into the whispers of the Lord. The chapters that emphasized the simple experience of being with God challenged me to come before Him without pretense. Too often I find that I come to the Lord with an agenda, not asking the Lord to reveal His desires to me or how I might follow Him more fully. Through my quiet sessions with the Lord, I have been challenged to surrender my worries to Him, borrowing from the Quaker practice of "palms down, palms up", representing release and reception.

Some common threads I found reviewing my entries during my times of silence are waiting for the Lord to speak, to lean into His presence, and to position myself to receive His counsel. This exercise reminded me of the instance where Elijah went up to Mount Sinai to hear from God and did not find Him in the magnificent displays of nature, but rather in the quiet stillness. I also recalled the numerous mentions of Jesus withdrawing to quiet places to pray and fellowship with The Father. I began to ponder what the reality of walking in oneness with the Father would look like in word and deed. I reflected on what it would mean to seek after the Lord with all my heart as Jeremiah wrote in his eponymous book. Yet another example from Scripture that highlights the value of stillness with God that I focused on is the instance with Martha and Mary, where Mary had chosen what was better at the moment by sitting and listening to Jesus. The repetition of these meetings with the Lord has increased my appetite for deeper intimacy with the Father. I found that the prayer for the Lord to draw me close has had a positive effect on my walk with Him. I would pray that God would increase my sensitivity to Him, because He is always present but we are not always aware of Him being near. These moments of stillness, along with the private retreats illuminated the importance of slowing down and ceasing

activity so that we might hear from the Lord.

Over the course of the semester, I had met with a mentor that I had grown a relationship with over the years. The four areas of discussion that were to be covered during these meetings led to a deeper vulnerability with him that has created room for greater growth. I recognize the value of having a close brother who can speak truth into my life, challenge any presuppositions I have, and to encourage me in struggles that I once thought were exclusive only to me. It took humility for me to reveal my sin pattern to my mentor as my struggle with pornography has often been one that is deeply tied to my shame. I also struggle with inviting others to keep me accountable on my sin patterns, because it would require me to relinquish my sin to others and to the Lord, otherwise I would be able to continue in my sin patterns in secrecy. However, I know that regularly confessing my sin and leaning on others is part of growing in spiritual maturity. At first I was unsure of what my mask was that I hid behind, but over time I identified my mask as being one of busyness. It was easy for me to engross myself in activity without inviting others into my internal struggles. Through careful observation my mentor noticed that my times of silence involved a consistent calling to draw near to the Lord. He asked me what I had gained from all these exercises I had done throughout this course and I realized the necessity and influence regular times of reflection and vulnerability have on my intimacy with God. I could engage in all of these regular exercises, yet if the aim is not to encounter the Lord and to develop a deeper relationship with Him, then I am missing a crucial element in these practices. Lastly, as I considered how I cultivate intimacy with the Lord, I have found that regular times of prayer, scripture reading, and times of stillness have been a great help for me in drawing near to the Lord. As a result of all of these meetings, I have been convicted to be more forthcoming regarding my sin patterns toward God and other people. I have discovered a freedom that came

from practically inviting others into my hidden depths.

For the spiritual triad questions, I choose my best friend and a fellow seminary student and friend to walk with me on my journey. When sharing my experiences with these questions, my seminary friend was able to share about his false self, and I noticed that we had some overlap with our fears. We both wrestle with the idea of failing, and I found that coming to terms with the fact that we will not always be perfect, but we are called to be faithful to be a freeing reality to the situation the false self can create. Seeing his transparency, I recognize the importance of solidarity and compassion when working together towards a common goal. He challenged me on my response to unanswered prayer, reminding me that at times the Lord may be requiring me to wait, and through his own response, I know that it is natural to be frustrated. However, it is good to recall the goodness of God and His care for us in the moments where we lack understanding or need to wait. I was also challenged on my false self's desire for recognition. I was asked what type of recognition I am looking for and the source of it. On the topic of creating worship experiences for ministry, my seminary friend wants to give people the best opportunity to hear the gospel. Being able to do this would require an intimate knowledge of a person's spiritual instincts and may require us to step out of our comfort zones. When sharing our experiences with how comfortable we feel with situations that cause us to be vulnerable, I saw common ground on how we share more when the relationships have developed to a certain point. Going through these questions has revealed to me the necessity of others to point out blind spots, to give and receive encouragement, and to bear one another's burdens. Our spiritual lives are not meant to be expressed in isolation from one another, as we are all part of the greater body of Christ, feeling the joys and pains that other parts experience.

Having gone through the assignments in this class, I have been given a greater

appreciation for spiritual development. It has come to my attention that I often compartmentalize parts of my life and subconsciously believe that God is not involved in those matters. However, as I reflect on the “small” moments where I have learned to invite God in, there has been a subtle yet noticeable growth in my understanding of Him being involved in every aspect of my life. The various readings and exercises that we have undertaken has helped me position myself to encounter and hear from God. I am all the more convinced of the intentional choices we can make so that we might have greater intimacy with the Lord. With that in mind, I plan to integrate some of the practices from this course into my daily life. The times of stillness, the retreats of silence, and the regular meditation on the Word has rejuvenated my desire to fall deeper in love with the Lord. I have been encouraged to be more forthcoming with my weaknesses and sin patterns in conversations with God and others. My hope is to read Scripture more transformatively than functionally, taking time to digest what I am reading and reflecting on how this impacts my relationship with Christ. The silent retreats have been incredibly refreshing and helpful, and I plan to continue doing these at least twice a year. Because of them, I appreciate the value of setting aside intentional time for intimacy with the Lord. All these practices demonstrate to me that often the “small things” can be avenues for subtle yet tremendous change in our relationship with God. I am convicted by God’s words to the Israelites through Isaiah when He says “the people honor me with their lips but their hearts are far from me” in Isaiah 29:13. This word reminds me that no matter how much pomp I put into my practice of spiritual disciplines, it is all for naught if not for the purpose of intimacy with the Father. I understand that spiritual development is an ongoing aspect of sanctification, and therefore I will never arrive at the finish line. However, this gives me great hope in that my walk with God will not lose its capacity to grow and challenge me.