

Rhythms Slowing

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We are in a new sermon series called “Rhythms,” looking at what practices we need to instill in our lives to create space to be with God. Last week Gary talked about Sabbath. Today, we’re talking about the rhythm of slowing—a counter-formational practice in a culture of hurry and hustle that cultivates a life that loves God and others well. We *need* this rhythm.

I’ve shared this story before, but I remember my first trip to Kenya. We flew from Indy to Nairobi and were planning to spend time in one of Kenya’s Mathare Valley slums. As we bumbled down the road to the school we were working with in a blue and white van, packed in like sardines, I noticed a train of kids running alongside us, all shouting, “Mizzoongoo! Mizzoongoo! Mizzoongoo!”

Mizzoongoo? What is *Mizzoongoo*? Of course, when I first heard them say that word, Mizzoongoo, I thought they were saying, “We missed you! We missed you!” Even though this was my first trip, I remember thinking to myself, “Oh my word, I’ve never met you—BUT I MISS YOU TOO!”

Turns out, that’s not what they were saying. They were saying, “MIZZ-OON-GOO.” I remember being enamored with this because everyone called us that. So I asked one very hesitant Kenyan how that word originated. And the hesitant Kenyan said that “Mizzoongoo” is a word that means, “one who spins around.” Apparently, the word originated because when the Kenyans first encountered us westerners, we were always so busy, moving from one thing to the next that it looks like we are just running ourselves ragged in circles. And I thought to myself, “They are so right. We are Mizzoongoo.”

Here’s the thing: in our day and age, I don’t think it’s farfetched to say that we have a problem with hurry. We are Mizzoongoo. Just listen how people talk—like whenever you ask someone “Hey! How’s life been?” What’s the answer? “Busy!” Or sometimes people say that but in a more subtle way. You hear people talk about “energy management,” as in, “Hey man, what’s new?” “Oh, you know, been exhausted with work and the kids—I’m really trying to manage my energy.” Or we talk about needing to recharge—“I don’t know about you, Jim, but I really just need a day, maybe the whole weekend. Really need to recharge the batteries, you know?”

I don’t think we need the philosophers, the sociologists, the psychologists, or the Kenyans to tell us that we live in a society of tiredness, a burnout society, and that we are pathologically busy. We feel it. We know that all too often we sacrifice God’s intended rhythm for our lives on the altars of “getting stuff done” and “experiencing all that life has to offer” and “not missing out,” leaving us emotionally drained, mentally burnt out, physically exhausted, spiritually fatigued, and unable to create space to love both God and others like we know we should.

This is why I couldn’t agree more with Dallas Willard, who once said that hurry (the opposite of slowing) is “the great spiritual enemy in our day.” He said that in order for our spiritual lives to flourish, we must “ruthlessly eliminate hurry from our lives.”

I have three movements for the sermon today: (1) Why do we hurry? (2) What good does slowing do? (3) How do we go about it?

Before we dive into Scripture, I want to pause and, like last week, I want to give us a moment to practice what we’re preaching right now.

For a moment, simply breathe. Take a deep breath in and breathe out slowly. Notice how your body is feeling. Breathe in the love of God and breathe out any of the hurry you feel sitting in your body from the morning. What we're doing isn't frilly, it's just taking into account that we're embodied creatures. Breathe in, breathe out.

Here's a couple questions for you to reflect on prayerfully as you continue breathing:

1. How would you describe the pace of your life right now? Slow? Hurried? Easygoing?
2. Where in your body, mind, and soul are you feeling the effects of speed?
3. How is your pace of life affecting your ability to love God and others?

Now, I'll read over you this reflection from Ignatius of Loyola:

God who loves us creates us and wants to share life with us forever. Our love response takes shape in our praise and honor and service of the God of our life. All the things in this world are also created because of God's love and they become a context of gifts, presented to us so that we can know God more easily and make a return of love more readily. As a result, we show reverence for all the gifts of creation and collaborate with God in using them so that by being good stewards we develop as loving persons in our care of God's world and its development. But if we abuse any of these gifts of creation or, on the contrary, take them as the center of our lives, we break our relationship with God and hinder our growth as loving persons. In everyday life, then, we must hold ourselves in balance before all created gifts insofar as we have a choice and are not bound by some responsibility. We should not fix our desires on health or sickness, wealth or poverty, success or failure, a long life or a short one. For everything has the potential of calling forth in us a more loving response to our life forever with God. Our only desire and our one choice should be this: I want and I choose what better leads me to God's deepening life in me."

I love that last line: "I want and I choose what better leads me to God's deepening life in me." Well, if we want to move beyond hurry, we've got to start with why hurry exists. So, movement #1: why do we hurry?

1. We try to be God.

If you're familiar with church and sermons, you know how the Scriptures begin: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." And with the breath of life and the dust of the earth, God created man and woman in his image.

And if you know how the story continues, you'll know that in chapter 3, Satan enters the picture and tempts Eve and Adam to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the one tree they weren't supposed to partake of. Satan offers Eve fruit from that tree saying that the reason God was holding out on her was because, "God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

Now, here's what I want us to home in on. Did you catch that little phrase near the end? Satan tempts Eve with the idea that she could be like God.

Adam and Eve were already like God in a sense. They were made *imago Dei*—in God's image. But here, Satan tempts them with more, specifically with the idea that they could transcend the way God created them and become exactly like him. But they forgot the other side of the coin. They weren't just *imago Dei*; they were also formed from the "dust of the ground" (Genesis 2:7). What does this mean? It means

as created beings, we have limitations—physical bodies, wealth, intellect, personality, talents and gifts, time, etc.

I remember once when my own limitations became very clear to me. We were on a family vacation when my brother, Tim, started doing what little brothers do on family vacations—poking and prodding, invading my space—and I had had enough. I was tired. But I wasn't quite exhausted at the beginning, so my initial response was kind. It started out basically like, "Timothy, my dearest brother, please withhold any of your extremities from usurping this imaginary, but agreed upon, boundary that we have established in order to form a perfect union, to establish justice in this vehicle, and to ensure domestic tranquility and both your and my general welfare. Please and thank you."

Didn't work. "Timothy, my dearest brother..." transformed into, "Tim. Stop." But still he kept on. "Tim. Enough." Of course, we still had more driving to do. "Tim. STOP." Finally, as the jabbing continued, I was done. Like a volcanic eruption, a clenched fist launched itself into his arm and two things happened: (1) he was forced back and (2) he was taken aback. Like, "Woah." And I was like, "The power!" But then I was like, "What just happened?"

Ever since that moment, I have realized, "Emerson, you are limited. You only can *take* so much, *do* so much, *be* so much."

I think that, secretly, our culture tempts us to try to be like God all the time and transcend our limitations. Our culture tempts us to go all the places, know all the stuff, and do all the things—and it says that not only *should* we be able to have it all, know it all, and do it all but that we *can*.

But as much as we'd like to think that we can take on God's omnipresence so we can go all the places, or as much as we'd like to think that we can take on God's omniscience so we can know all the stuff, as much as we'd like to think that we can take on God's omnipotence to do all the things—pick your divine attribute of choice—we *can't*.

Our limitations remind us ultimately that HE is Creator, WE are creature; HE is infinite, WE are finite; HE is deity, WE are dust.

Our prideful desire "to be like God," this idea that we can transcend how we've been created, is keeping us from slowing. We may know in our heads that God is Creator, Infinite, and Deity and that we are creature, finite, and dust, but we have a lived-idolatry that results in hurry.

That's the first reason: we try to be like God. Here's another potential reason: sometimes...

2. We don't believe God.

Sometimes we hurry ourselves, not because we are trying to be like God, but because we don't believe God. What I mean is that our inability to slow is because we actually do not trust God to be God in our lives.

I don't know about you, but I'm a "figure-it-outer." Growing up I had this experience when I was little that has served me well in many ways. I was supposed to cut the grass. Of course, something happened and I couldn't get things to work. So, I called Dad. "Dad! Help!" You know how he responded? "Figure it out!" *Figure it out*. Now, you do need to know that I definitely had not been disrespectful, I definitely hadn't been belligerent, and I definitely hadn't been smart-alecky with him about doing this chore. Ok, I lie. I had been. That's why he said what he did. "Oh, you're so smart? *Figure it out*."

That has stuck with me. Honestly, sometimes I wonder if I bring any of that “figure-it-out-ness” to how I follow Jesus.

- Got relationship strife, Emerson? Figure it out.
- Got physical pain, Emerson? Figure it out.
- Got issues at work, Emerson? Figure it out.
- Got a stronghold, Emerson? Figure it out.

In Psalm 46:10, God says, “Be still and know that I am God.” It’s such a nice verse about slowing down. What’s funny is the *context* of this verse. Because you know what that command from God to *be still* sits right in the middle of? Absolute *chaos*.

Psalm 46 opens with this in the background: “Though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.” Excuse me? The command is to *be still* even though the earth gives way? The command is to *be still* even though the mountains fall into the heart of the sea? The command is to *be still* even though the waters roar and foam and the mountains shake? Doesn’t God know how ridiculous that is? What does he expect me to do? To stand idly by and allow my life to go to tatters?

Not exactly. But he does ask us to let go of our white-knuckling and our stress baking and our helicoptering over our problems to the point that we run ourselves ragged. Why? Well, it’s because of what’s interspersed all through the Psalm.

It’s actually the internalization of *God as refuge and strength* (verse 1), of God as an *ever-present help* (verse 1), of God as he who “helps at break of day” (verse 5), of God who is the “Lord Almighty” (verse 7), of God as “our fortress” (verse 7), of God as the one who “makes wars cease” (verse 9), of God as the one who “breaks the bow” and “shatters the spear” (verse 9).

It’s the internalization of all that which leads us to the exhortation in verse 10: to *be still* and know that God is God.

I was thinking about this the other day, thinking through this passage, and I prayed, “Father, if I’m being honest, you don’t always feel like my refuge. Honestly, sometimes it feels like you refuse to fix the situation like I’d like. Sometimes, God, you don’t feel like an ‘ever-present help.’ Sometimes it’s more like you’re an ‘ever-distant-adversary.’ Sometimes, Father, it doesn’t feel like you’re a fortress; sometimes it feels more like I’m in the middle of the jungle, at night, where I can’t see, and there’s growling and howling and hissing and the pattering of feet all around me, *and* I’m out there alone—and naked.

Doesn’t life feel that way sometimes? (Ok, maybe you don’t feel *quite* that way!) Like when life is hectic and mountains are being thrown down around us and the seas are raging, isn’t it so easy to know *up here* what’s true about God, but at the same time feel like we need to run ourselves ragged plotting and planning, analyzing and examining, *figuring it out* for ourselves instead of believing that God will be God for us? Isn’t some of our hurry due to our inability to trust and surrender our lives into the hands of our sovereign, refuge-providing God?

That’s the second reason. Why do we hurry? Because sometimes we try to be God, other times we don’t believe God, and here’s the third: sometimes...

3. We fail to see God.

How so? Well, I want to turn our attention to Jesus. Because here's the thing: when you read the gospels, Jesus never seems to be *hurried*, does he? Certainly, he had things to do, places to be, people to heal, Pharisees to answer, disciples to disciple, and so on. He had a *full* schedule. But hurried? I don't get that impression. I think this was because he saw the world differently than we do.

In John 5, Jesus reminds us that his business is his Father's. He says, "Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing." Amazing, isn't it? *I can do nothing by myself, I only do what the Father is doing.* How many of us can say that? Usually when people ask us, "What's up man?" What do we say? "Oh, you know—work, kids, baseball practices, Rooted, NFL draft, etc." I've never once in my life heard someone respond to the "What's up man? What've you been up to lately?" with, "*I can do nothing by myself, I only do what the Father is doing.*"

I'm kind of kidding around, but I wonder if part of our problem with hurry is that we fail to see the world the way Jesus saw the world. Where we go wrong is we find ourselves responding to *every* request, *every* form of stimuli, and *every* impulse that comes our way because we are not looking for the one thing that we have pre-determined we want our lives to be focused in on (i.e., joining the Father). Instead of asking, "What is the Father up to?" and working to say, "I will only do what the Father is doing," we are lost in our countless desires.

Jesus, on the other hand was looking around for one thing: the Father's work. And when he saw the Father working, drawing, captivating, attracting, and *loving*, he joined in.

Which is what slowing is all about, which leads to movement #2: what good does slowing do?

We slow because slowing is all about love. Hurry, on the other hand, is antithetical to a life of unconditioned, present, intimate, make-space-for-God-and-other-people kind of love.

It's why Thomas Merton once said, "To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to the *violence of our times.*"

Hurry, the violence of our times? Really? Think about it.

Ruth Haley Barton has this assessment of sorts where she lists the top 10 signs of hurry. She says hurry manifests itself with:

1. Irritability—quick to snap back, or grouch at people
2. Hypersensitivity
3. Defensiveness— "I'm not defensive! You're defensive!"
4. Restlessness—can't rest or sleep, have to bring the stimuli back into our bodies
5. Compulsive overworking—can't stop doing email after email, doing task after task
6. Emotional numbness—narrow range of emotions; feeling flat except for anger and anxiety; no capacity for empathy
7. Escapist behaviors—e.g., Netflix
8. Disconnection from identity and calling—sucked into the tyranny of the urgent
9. Inability to attend to human needs—not sleeping or eating or exercising like we should
10. Slipping in our spiritual practices—our ability to give and receive love in relationship with God and others; as the to-do list goes up, time for this goes down

When we are hurried, we can't love. Hurry keeps us from being able to love both God and other people because instead of being able to be reflective and responsive to the presence of God or in the presence of others, we are too fatigued, we are irritable, hypersensitive, disconnected from identity and calling, defensive, not empathetic, and so on. This is what hurry does. Hurry kills presence. Hurry kills intimacy. Hurry kills love. Hurry inhibits our ability to be loving persons.

Now juxtapose that with a life of love. What does love require of us? 1 Corinthians 13 says, "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

Isn't this who we find Jesus to be in the gospels?

I'm reminded of a story John 4 where Jesus is weary from a journey and yet makes space to be with a woman who needed compassion. I'm reminded of Luke 18 when Jesus was near Jericho and a blind man heard about Jesus being nearby, cried out, and was silenced by everyone, but then "Jesus stopped" and he healed the guy.

I'm reminded of a moment in Luke 8 where Jesus is met by Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue. Jairus *implores* Jesus to come and heal his 12-year-old daughter. You know Jesus—he sets off to go heal this little girl. As he travels, he becomes hemmed in by the crowds. Everyone is clamoring for his attention. They know him as the miracle-worker from Galilee. They've got diseases and ailments, viruses and infections, physical maladies, and spiritual impurities. In the middle of all the racket, there's a woman. She has suffered with a discharge of blood for 12 years of her life. Can you imagine? She's tried everything in her power to get it to stop. Nothing will work. She's exasperated and at a loss—until she sees Jesus. And Jesus is making his way through the crowds. He's coming closer and closer. Maybe if she can just touch the hem of his garment, she could get his attention. She reaches out. She touches him. Power goes out and he *notices* her. Luke tells us that Jesus said, "Who was it that touched me?" The disciples are exasperated too. They respond, "Master! The crowds surround you and press in on you!" So as to say, "Jesus! Don't you notice all the hollering, all the talking, and the commotion, all the jingle of coins, all the jangle of the exchange of goods happening around? How could we possibly answer that question?" Jesus responds: "Someone touched me; I know that power has gone out from me." And then we read this: "Then the woman, seeing that she could not go unnoticed, came trembling and fell at his feet. In the presence of all the people, she told why she had touched him and how she had been instantly healed. Then he said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace.'"

Jesus does this kind of stuff *all the time*. He makes room. He loves. He sees what the Father is doing and he joins in. He is not hurried. Jesus' pace was always the pace of love. Never slower, never faster. (It just turns out for us, we probably need to slow down!)

With all that being said, we're at movement #3: how do we slow?

1. Examine your heart.

John Mark Comer, a pastor, once remarked that "Hurry isn't so much the sign of a disordered schedule; it's the sign of a disordered heart." As we did at the beginning of our time together, do a sort of GPS of where you're at right now. In prayer, consider:

- How would you describe the pace of your life right now? Slow? Hurried? Steady?
- Where in your body, mind, and soul are you feeling the effects of speed?

- How is your pace of life affecting your ability to love?

Examine your heart.

2. Learn to see.

The living God is active all around us. We just need a pace slow enough and eyes attentive enough to see him.

I remember being in my life group one evening and we were laying hands to pray over a couple in our group about ready to have a baby. As we were taking turns praying over them, I thought to myself, “God is here with us.” That was a God moment.

I remember another time, doing a hospital visit years ago with an elderly lady. Her husband of many, many years was just lying there lifeless, hooked up to so many tubes and wires, and whatnot, and I got to just be present with her. And, this may be weird, but as I sat across from her, I noticed her eyes showing both weariness and age, I noticed her hands showing the fear she was holding onto for her husband, I noticed her tissue box nearly empty, and I opened up psalm 23 and read it over her. We had entered into sacred space. That was a God moment.

And then a month ago, I was sitting around honestly kind of bored and felt a prompting to go for a walk. A neighbor was out standing by the corner. At first, I was going to skirt on by him, but something in me moved me to stop. We ended up striking up a conversation and I got to hear his story, find out about his family, and ask him about what he thinks about God. That was a God moment.

Had I not had eyes to see, I would have missed it all. I would have sped right past it all. I would have treated our group’s prayer like any other prayer. I would not have seen that this woman in the hospital needed that specific Psalm. I would have not seen that my neighbor wanted someone to listen to him. I would have missed out on God in these moments. So, learn to see. And when you see something, slow down.

3. Get a rhythm.

We have crafted these books to help you in this journey. Inside each week is a QR code link to a podcast where we dive deeper in conversation on this week’s rhythm as well as three different tiers of practices: a 101 practice, a 201 practice, and a 301 practice.

We don’t only want this series to be something where we come and hear and learn and diagnose and be challenged—and then not do anything with it. We want to be different. We want this to seep into our day-to-day.

I truly believe that God is calling for us to become a slower people. He’s looking across the land for an unhurried minority, He’s looking for a people who are able to lead others to the green pastures of contented pace and the still waters of slow living. Contrary to popular belief, God’s not always looking for the *big*, the *bold*, and the *bombastic*. He’s not looking for the extraordinary, nor for, in the words of Richard Foster ‘manyness’ and ‘muchness,’ nor is he looking for, according to AW Tozer, “the monstrous heresy...of noise, size, activity and bluster...”

No. God is looking for ordinary folks, working ordinary jobs, in ordinary communities, with ordinary skills, in an ordinary church, with an ordinary slow pace to join in on his rhythm of love.