

Resistance, Reactivity, and Rhythms

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[0 : 0 0] So we have been in the Gospel of Mark, and we have been on this pretty quick, fast journey about what Jesus has been up to from verse 1. We talked about the radical political implications of the beginning, the RK, the reign of the Gospel about Jesus, the King, the Messiah, the Son of God, this radical proclamation that God has shown up in the person of Jesus and is saying things are going to change. We've talked about John the Baptist and the proclamation that he made to repent that the kingdom of God had come near about confession and repentance and baptism, and then Jesus bursts onto the scene and receives a baptism that he doesn't really need, but he does it anyway, and then there's this Trinitarian situation where God the Father is speaking words of love over God the Son, and then God the Spirit shows up like a pigeon slash dove. You can go listen to that sermon if you're confused right now, and he shows up to send Jesus on his way, and then Jesus goes into the wilderness, and he's tested, and then he goes into the synagogue, and he starts casting out demons and healing, and he goes to Simon and Andrew's house, and he heals Simon and Simon's mother-in-law, and she gets up, and she's this model of discipleship, and then Jesus starts inviting everybody into Simon and Andrew's home, and the home turns into a hospital, and it's just this breathless pace that Mark has us on, and then at last we get to verse 35, which reads, very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went off to a solitary place where he prayed. I can take a breath, because the pace has finally relented. Now Simon and his companions went to look for Jesus, and when they found him, they exclaimed, everybody's looking for you.

Jesus replies, let's go somewhere else, to the nearby villages, so that I can preach there also.

That is why I have come. So Jesus traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues, and driving out demons. So at last we get this breath in the narrative about Jesus taking a break.

And the disciples being somewhat resentful that Jesus would dare to do so. Everybody is looking for you. And tonight I want to talk about three things. Number one, resistance. Pastors love their alliteration.

Number two, reactivity. And number three, rhythms. Resistance, reactivity, and rhythms. Now tonight we're going to talk broadly about the ideas of rest, Sabbath, solitude, taking a break. And I know, over my experience as a preacher and pastor, that when I talk to people about contemplative or meditative practices, usually the result is, eh, no thanks. But when you talk about it in terms of resistance, you can go ahead and put it up and put it up. You have more of an idea of like, ooh, Sabbath has resistance to toxic capitalism. I could be interested. So let's talk about resistance to maybe keep your attention a little bit.

[3 : 2 9] Resistance is this idea of being, of refusing to be defined by the powers that want to take hold of us. Resistance. Throughout the previous presidential administration, you could hop on social media and see signs of the resistance. That there were people in places of power who were not going to go along with the destructive way that our political system was going. They were the resistance. If you run about in any sort of like protest circles, you'll hear about resistance. Resistance against white supremacy.

Resistance against late-stage capitalism. Resistance against, you know, wage theft and worker oppression and all these forms of resistance. And we talk about resistance because we recognize that there are these powers that press in on us and they're trying to deform us to make us think that extracting value out of our bodies and underpaying us and exhausting us, they try to make us think that this is normal in the way it always has to be. And so we come up with methods and rhythms of resistance to say, no, we can put a stop to this. We have resistance against forms of capitalism that are abusive and oppressive to workers. Now, look, I'll be honest, capitalism has done me some favors over my lifetime.

But it's also, I've seen the harmful effects on, has on ecology, on environment, on people, on particular classes of people. And so we figure out ways to say, no, we protest, we strike, we quit. We have resistance against toxic family or social systems where we recognize that we come from a family of origin.

And that family of origin, whether we like it or not, not only passes on DNA about the size of our hips or the how high or short or wide we are, but also passes on DNA about how do I deal with conflict?

How do I say no? Do I ever say no? How do I respond when my mother or my dad or my cousin or my brother makes a disparaging comment? And so we create forms of resistance to say, no, I won't take on the patterns of my family. I won't take on the patterns of the social life that I grew up in. I will resist it in some way. We have resistance to addictions and compulsions and create communities of practice where we try to figure out ways that we don't have to be so attached to substances and habits that harm us. We have resistance to the inner and outer voices and pressures that try to tell us that we're not good enough. We don't shape up. We need to always work harder and get up earlier and stay up later and put in that extra hour and make sure that we are kissing up to the right people in the right time and this inner and internal and external voices that say, don't stop. Just keep on going. Don't stop. Just keep on going. You're not good enough yet. Maybe in a little bit you will. Anybody know about the lie of six weeks? The lie of six weeks. I will be less busy in six weeks. It's never true, but we tell ourselves that, yeah, I'll exhaust myself today because it'll be better in six weeks. And then six weeks comes along and you're still as busy as ever. Now, forms of resistance are basically ways of setting boundaries. Boundaries are the rules and the principles that I set up in my life so that I can love myself well so I can love others well. Tricia Hearst, she is a black theologian and activist.

[7:11] She runs a social media account called the Knapp Ministry. She writes, healthy boundaries are a form of rest, of basically this biological need that I have to know when to stop. And a boundary says, this is the place where I come to an end and I do no more. I highly recommend you follow the Knapp ministry on Twitter or Instagram. It's deeply powerful. Boundaries are a way that we make sure that we know where ourselves end and others begin. Now, in Christendom, in Christianity, in churches, when you hear pastors like myself telling you that you need to give more and volunteer more and put in more hours, and oftentimes there can be a guilt and shame thing attached to this because, well, aren't you supposed to be known by your love? Aren't you supposed to be known by your generosity? You need to keep doing, doing, doing, doing. And so we confuse the command to love, Lisa Turkest writes, with a disease to please. Well, I don't want anybody to be disappointed in me. Well, I don't want anybody to think less of me.

So I'll just keep saying yes. I have a good friend, Chris. Chris, if you're watching, hello. And he, back in college, had some real boundary issues. He always said yes to just about everything. And so he was over-promising and under-delivering. He would be late to things. He would forget things because they didn't end up on his calendar. But he kept saying yes. So Chris had a friend named Brendan. And Brendan said, hey, Chris, I noticed this in you. And there's this book called Boundaries I think you should read. Boundaries by Cloud and Townsend. I think it's a book that every grown-up needs to read to know how to adult well.

And so Brendan says to my friend Chris, hey, you should read this book. Now, Chris is reporting back to me and a few other friends in like an accountability group. And Chris is telling us, when Brendan offered me the book, I knew I didn't have time to read it, but I couldn't say no.

You see the problem? We confuse the command to love, which Jesus does give us, with this disease to please, an inability to say no because someone might think less of us. But, Lisa Turkhurst goes on, whenever you say yes to something, there's less of you for something else. So make sure your yes is worth the less. Sometimes we can believe that when we don't set boundaries, when we don't resist, when we keep saying yes, well then I will just be like elastic man or elastic girl or elastic person and keep stretching and stretching and stretching. And there's an infinite amount of me to go along.

But of course, that's not true. I have limits. You have limits. We all have limits. And so whatever we say yes to, that means we're saying no to something else, whether we like it or not.

[10 : 01] And so we need to learn how to resist. Now, how do we do that? What does that look like when we resist well? Let's talk about non-reactivity. We talked about resistance. Let's talk about non-reactivity. So there's a few concepts in the social sciences, something called family systems theory that I want to teach you tonight. So number one was the idea of self-differentiation.

Self-differentiation. Let me hear you all say self-differentiation. Yeah, you got most of the syllables. Good job. So self-differentiation is the ability to separate your emotions and actions from the emotions and actions of others. Basically, it's the ability to say that someone else is having an emotional response or acting in a certain way, and you can be separate from that. Now, do not confuse this with detachment. Detachment is an inability to care about someone else's emotions. Okay? So detachment is inability. Self-differentiation is a ability. Detachment, I'll be honest, I have issues with detachment. I intellectualize everything when there's a problem. I stuff my emotions down, and I find myself often incapable, unable to care about someone else's emotional state. This happens because I tend to be a little conflict avoidant. If you know the Enneagram and Enneagram 3, I care deeply what you think about me. And so I'm always making sure that I am managing my external state well so you don't think less. But that often, in an unhealthy way, turns it into not caring about your emotional state because it's all about me. And this shows up in my family. It shows up in my marriage that when someone's having a strong emotional response, I detach.

Self-differentiation is different. Differentiation has the ability to separate myself, to not be controlled by someone else's emotions, both in the positive of, you're freaking out, I'm going to stay calm, or you're freaking out, and I'm not just going to immediately eject myself from the situation.

Is this making sense? Okay. Self-differentiation is what Jesus is showing when Simon and the disciples come along and say, everybody's looking for you. And Jesus is saying, let's go somewhere else.

This isn't Jesus not caring or detaching because Jesus wants to go somewhere else because he has a job to do in different cities, to preach and push out the powers, the demons, the things that we need to resist. So Jesus is showing the ability to hear about someone else's emotional state, but respond appropriately. Jesus is also showing us something called a non-anxious presence. It's the ability to be present, but not to absorb or reflect anxiety into a situation. Now again, non-anxious presence means that we have to be present. It's not the same as ejecting ourselves from the situation or from detaching. I am, you know, struggling, keeping a healthy relationship with my parents right now.

[13 : 34] There has been some turmoil. It's been hard because there's been distance. And so I am detached. I am not as present as I would like myself to be. Just being honest and kind of confessing that to you all tonight. And what's happening is that I am taking the anxiety into relationship and absorbing it and making it my own. And I'm reflecting it back to you all. So what can I do instead? A non-anxious presence is able to see that there's anxiety in the room, that in any given relationship, there's going to be some level of anxiety. There's something changing. There's something different. There's something that's making me upset. And I can choose to either triangulate, create a relational triangle and bring somebody else in, try to put them on my side, try to get my side of the story out there.

I can try to reflect the anxiety by getting everyone anxious as well. Or I can absorb it and I can take someone else's anxiety and make it my own. A non-anxious presence is able to be present in the situation and be able to say, okay, I am empathizing with you. I can hear you. I can see that you're upset, but I'm not going to, I'm not forced, my emotions are not forced to join you in the anxiety.

Finally, there's the idea of non-reactivity or non-judgment, which is basically an ability to respond instead of react. When you go to the doctor and they hit you, your knee with a little hammer and you have a knee jerk reaction, you don't only do this in a physical way, you do this in an emotional and social way as well. And so you can have emotional knee jerk reactions that when your parents or your sibling or your boss or your friend or your pastor says a phrase or a word or calls you for a meeting. It's what happens when you get the text that says, hey, can we talk?

There's no period or there's a dot, dot, dot, or there is a period. That's even worse. And you have this like, what's happening? That's an emotional knee jerk response because you have had an experience where, hey, can we talk has led to a breakup or a firing or a demotion or some form of turmoil that you weren't looking for. So to have the ability to be non-reactive and non-judgmental is to get the, hey, can we talk period and to be able to respond with curiosity or a sense of, I wonder, as opposed to, I fear, I'm anxious. Jesus shows all of these continually throughout the gospel that he is able to have a crowd of people and he will sneak away and be able to spend time in prayer with God. That he will hear someone's anxious response. Everybody is looking for you, which is certainly an exaggeration. It's early in the morning. Everybody's still sleeping. And Jesus to be able to respond and say, okay, and we're going to go do this. Now, that's a great list that I just told you, but how do we get there? How do we do that? Because it's really, really difficult to just automatically put ourselves in a situation where we are suddenly people that we weren't before.

I, over the past year, have recognized in myself that I'm becoming an angrier or an angrier driver. Do I think DC will do that to you? Maryland drivers will do that to you? Thank you.

[17 : 14] And so, like, no joke, I am finding myself, this happened a couple months ago, like, it's me, Emily's in the passenger seat. Someone is trying to cut me off and I cut them off instead, basically. And so they pulled up next to me and they rolled down their window and they're yelling at me and I rolled down my window and I'm shouting over Emily, over my wife, to yell at the other person. This is not wonderful behavior for the lead pastor of the table church or really any person at all. But I found myself getting more and more in the habit of responding with anger at slight inconveniences. And so I made this resolution with myself of, I instead want to be known as the kindest driver on the road, but this is the problem with New Year's resolutions. You can't just wake up one morning and suddenly be a different person. So that's why we got to talk about our third thing, responding rhythms. Now, you may have heard the phrase spiritual disciplines in the church or in

Christianity. Spiritual disciplines. Now, let me give you a definition. This is Dallas Willard's definition. He says, these are activities within our power that enable us to accomplish what we cannot do by direct efforts. The effect of discipline is to enable us to do what needs to be done when it needs to be done. Now, when I do push-ups, which don't let this shirt deceive you, is only once a year. But when I do push-ups, I don't do them in the off chance that I will be asked to join in the world push-up championship. That's not why I exercise or lift a weight. I lift a weight or exercise so that in the off chance that I have to help someone move their furniture or lift a car off of my child or some other situation where being strong might be handy. That's why I do the push-up. I do an activity that is within my power, barely, so that I can do something that's not within my power. I do the exercise, not for the sake of the exercise, but to do something that I would not be able to do otherwise. That is a discipline.

Now, in the spiritual realm, I cannot, by direct effort, wake up and be the nicest driver in D.C., as much as I would like to. But what I can do is I can set up rhythms or exercises within my power to become a kinder person. So, I do not find the same adrenaline rush at getting angry and yelling at drivers. That does not happen when I'm in the grocery store. So, the grocery store is a great place for me to practice kindness. Yes, you can cut your cart in front of mine. I will choose that instead. Yes, I will let you get in front of me as I'm staring at the cereal aisle. You, it's all about you today, person. And I can practice that kindness and realize, oh, these five-second inconveniences aren't the end of the world. If I can practice it in the grocery store, maybe the next time I'm cut off in traffic, I won't get so riled up. This is the intention of a discipline. Now, I do a lot of pastoral counseling. So, someone calls me up, they've got an issue, and they want to pray about it, talk through some scripture, some solutions. And I will tell you what will happen if you ever call me up for pastoral counseling. We will have a good conversation. You will feel heard and listened to.

I will be a non-anxious presence. I will let you dump onto me, and I will not increase your anxiety. I will also make sure that you know that I am with you. And then I will start to ask some questions.

One of which is, do you have any contemplative or meditative practices in your life? And they'll ask something like, what do you mean? I'm like, well, have you ever meditated? And most of the time, no. And I've said, what's your prayer life like? And most of us, and this is perfectly normal, don't have much of a prayer life. Prayer is awkward and boring. And so, I'll say, well, what about a contemplative practice where instead of feeling like you have to just list all your anxieties to God, or you have to come up with these really fancy words to impress God, you rather turned off the lights and turned off the music and sat in silence just knowing that God was near. And inevitably, the response is, no, thank you. I don't have time for that. But it's my belief, and I only have this belief because of my own experience and because of the experience of spiritual leaders in the decades and centuries and millennia past throughout religious traditions, Christian and Eastern religion and Jewish and everywhere in between. Every spiritual giant will tell you that if you want to experience the divine, you will do that through silence and solitude. Solitude, this is again Willard's definition, is choosing to step free from human relationships for a period of time in isolation and anonymity. I'm not going to proclaim it from the rooftops that I'm doing this. To make room for occupation of our lives by

[22 : 24] God. It is to, and this is hard when we think about prayer, but it is to do nothing and to not try to make anything happen. Which is really hard because I've got my iPad and I've got my phone and I actually left my watch at home, which is weird for me, and I've got a laptop over there and we are surrounded by constant connectivity. I've got two different to-do apps on my phone, each one with 30 different entries on there. I've got a calendar thing that beeps at me every 15 minutes about a new thing that I need to do, and that's just my life. I also have a wife and I've got two kids and I am constantly bombarded by busyness and back to this resistance thing.

All of the pressures that our consumeristic, capitalistic world places on me that says, you don't own enough things, you don't own the right things, you don't produce enough, you don't get enough likes on the Instagram, you need to keep trying. And so this idea of solitude and silence, of Jesus getting up early in the morning, which maybe for some of you is 5 a.m., maybe early is 10 a.m., you choose the definition, but to get up earlier, to spend time with God and do nothing. But Dallas Willard continues, it is the primary spiritual discipline which enables us to learn all the rest. So this is like the least popular message that I ever preach, of if you want to feel connected with God. If you want to reflect the kind of attitude that Jesus has in Mark 1, the ability to get away and to be able to say no, and the ability to not be defined by someone else's emotional response, to have a non-anxious, non-reactive presence, then as best as I've ever been able to tell, the only way to progress and mature into that is through silence and solitude.

That's all I know how. Now, if I were to give myself like an A plus on this sermon, I would give you a bunch of like tools and disciplines and suggestions on how to do that.

But it also felt counterintuitive to conclude a sermon with that, because that's just more things on the to-do list. The hardest thing to tell a busy person is, hey, I know you're busy, how about you try these things to be less busy? Well, no doubt, I would have done that already, except guess what?

I'm busy. And so we go around in this endless cycle of constant busyness, because there's no time to create time to be less busy. So how do I conclude a sermon like this? I don't have any great answers for you, other than to tell you my own experience. When Emily and I were, I don't know, a few years into our marriage. I was a few years into ministry at this point. We were living a life of striving and escape. And so it was this reckless pendulum of constant productivity, of striving, striving, working, putting in all the hours. And then we weren't resting, we were escaping.

[25 : 47] And so rest was not helpful. It was just crashing. Pizza and TV and a beer and no conversation, because we were just so burnt. And then we went to a retreat that was teaching some of these concepts and said, that pendulum you are experiencing is one that is out of whack, because God does call us into seasons of fruitfulness. We are meant for work. We are meant to bring good into this world.

There's fruitfulness, and then there is rest and abiding. Now, the thing that is counterintuitive about fruitfulness is that it has to come with seasons of pruning. Now, I'm not a farmer. I never have been, so I'm going on kind of hearsay here. But if you've ever been a wine dresser, you've grown something like asparagus or grapes or berries or a tree, you know that in order for that tree to get strong enough to produce fruit that will last, you've got to plant it. And then year one, you cut it back.

And then year two, you cut it back. And then year three, you cut it back so that it can gain strong roots and strong branches so that when it does bear fruit, it can last. It can stay on the tree or the vine.

And Jesus actually says this in the book of John chapter 15. It says, I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me abides in me. I will abide in them, and they will produce much fruit.

And whoever produces much fruit, Jesus says, the father, the gardener, will then prune back. Wait, what do you mean? Fruitfulness gets the discipline of pruning? Yes, because that's how we become the strong, courageous, differentiated, non-reactive people that we are called to be so that then we can rest and then we can bear fruit. Now we are constantly tempted into striving and escaping. There are always more things to sign up for, always more activities that we can be doing, always more ways that we can be trying to impress the capitalistic, consumeristic culture that we are in. And yet Jesus always calls us back to prune. If you want to bear fruit, prune. If you want to rest, cut back. And it's a counterintuitive thing to believe. It takes faith. But when Emily and I heard this message and when we heard this concept, then we basically laid out a big giant post-it note in front of us and there was on one side a yes and on one side a no. What are the few things that we will say yes to? And for every one of those, we've got to say no to three others. That's the only thing that we knew how to do. And now here's the other thing. We couldn't just do this once 10 years ago to a retreat. This is like every semester habit for us. We're saying yes to one thing, no to three more. Yes to one thing, no to three more. And we are practicing the ability to say no because guess what? People sometimes get a little angry when you say no. But we've learned that we don't have to take their anxiety on to ourselves and we can come to a place of health. And I would say a pretty decent life together because we've learned how to do these things. Now, it's not easy. It's hard. And by all means, we do not do this perfectly. I already told you about the four different very expensive Apple devices in my possession that cost too much money and take too much of my time. All right? So another confession for the night. I also can be influenced by this consumeristic culture. I know that. I also know that

[29 : 30] I can be influenced by other people's anxiety and remove myself. This is not about perfection. And if anybody tries to get you to perfect this tonight, then you are going to be driven mad.

Do not let perfection be the enemy of progress. What is the one thing that you can quit this week so that you can say yes to the best thing that God has for you? This is a conversation that we will have to keep having because we will keep being tempted by the voices that say everybody is looking for you. And we will keep looking to the example of Jesus who says, let's go somewhere else.