

Outward Bound

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

April 26, 2026 – PM Sermon

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Luke 4:42-44

What were Jesus' spiritual habits? What sort of devotional regime did he have? How did he structure his life with his Father? The Bible doesn't tell us a lot about that. There aren't any long explanations and descriptions of what Jesus did to anchor his day. There's nothing to tell us how many times a day he prayed or how much he studied the Torah.

When it comes to discerning Jesus' spiritual practices, all we get are passages like this one: little asides, little moments where we see Jesus doing something devotional. Passages like this one are so short and non-descript that they almost feel like a transition. You can read right through them in your own study of Scripture. But even though they are brief, I believe there's enough in these 3 verses for us to stop and pay attention. I want to look carefully at what Jesus does in this passage because I think Jesus has something to teach us here about the rhythm and shape of our own life.

As I read this passage, Jesus' devotional life has two parts here, two movements. The first one is the move inward, the inward move. "At daybreak, Jesus departed and went into a deserted place." Jesus has just finished a very busy day in Capernaum. He preached in the morning. He cast out an unclean Spirit at the synagogue. He healed Simon's mother-in-law after the service. He spent the entire evening receiving a long line of people with various ailments, listening to their stories and then healing them. It was a 16-hour day of ministry. It must have been completely draining.

So, in the morning Jesus gets up early and he goes off to a deserted place to be alone with God, he goes off to spend time in prayer and meditation, he goes off to practice the inward spiritual disciplines. It's something he did often. In the next chapter, just a few verses later in 5:16, after another round of pastoral care and healing for a lot of broken people, Luke tells us again, "Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed". And in Matthew 14 the day after spending time with five thousand people, healing them and ultimately feeding them, Jesus goes up on a mountain to pray. As a way to recharge his batteries and refresh his Spirit Jesus would find some quiet time to be with his Dad. It was his habit, his discipline.

And we know that these inward disciplines are supposed to be part of our life too. Our mothers taught us that if we wanted to be close to God we should say our prayers, read our Bible and have quiet time every day. For as long as I can remember, someone has been telling me that the key to my spiritual health is to stay faithful to these inward disciplines of prayer and scripture reading and as long as I can remember I've been trying to practice them. Prayer and bible reading aren't the only inward disciplines, they're only the most widely practiced. Fasting is also an inward discipline, so is meditation, so are long solitary walks in the woods. Giving is an inward discipline – something you are called to do in secret, but something that angles your life toward God. I would say that these are the disciplines we all know best. In fact, when we think of a devotional life, we think of these inward disciplines.

The inward disciplines have never been harder to practice than today. Our culture does not train inwardness. Sometimes it seems like our society is afraid of inwardness. Sometimes it seems like our culture is against inwardness. What is the name they give to our modern economy? They used to call it the information economy; now they call it the attention economy. That's because there's money to be made by getting people's attention. Everyone's after clicks and eyeballs. That means there are brilliant well-funded people who spend their days thinking of ways to distract you. It's no longer just the old distractions of television and celebrity gossip; now it's our phones. Our phones are distraction machines. When we are sitting quietly by ourselves, they beep and squeak and demand our attention. They don't want us to be inward. They don't want us to be quiet. They want us to scroll and click. As a result, modern people have impoverished inward lives.

All this helps explain the popularity of people like John Mark Comer with younger generations. John Mark Comer is a pastor from the west coast who writes books about the inward disciplines. His most famous one is probably *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*. The younger generations feel their lack of inwardness and they flock to these books. The young adult group at LaGrave is currently studying one of them. He is helping young Christians to step away from the noise of life, to put down their phones, to practice Sabbath, to pray, to fast, to practice inward disciplines. Young people are flocking to his stuff because they feel the poverty of their souls. They are looking for practices that will restore their inward life.

The inward disciplines are critically important, and they are the first move of Jesus' devotional life.

But the devotional life of Jesus isn't just prayer and fasting. Look what happens next: The people of Capernaum wake up in the morning and find out that Jesus is gone. They immediately go out looking for him and find him praying. Quite understandably they beg him to come back to town and stay with them. They have a proposal for him: "Jesus that was a powerful sermon you gave yesterday. And last night! Those healings! Well, it's been a long time since God has moved so powerfully here. So, Jesus, we were thinking, why don't you stay in town and become our town Rabbi!? We'll build you a big new synagogue, we'll make you a new parsonage with all the latest amenities, we'll give you an expense account. We'll give you one Saturday a month off..." As the text says, "they tried to keep him from leaving them."

This must have been tempting for Jesus. It's the kind of life most of us shoot for, right? Get yourself a good job in a place where you're appreciated and settle yourself down. But Jesus refused to stay. "I can't stay here. I must proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose." "I can't stay here; I must keep moving outward. I must."

Jesus is disciplining himself here, Jesus is devoting himself here, to the second half of his spiritual life, to the outward move. You look over the sweep of Jesus' life, and his whole life he had this outward urge. Yes, he cultivated inwardness and quiet times, but those inward times were balanced by, complemented by outward moves, by movement toward new places and new people.

Think of all the people Jesus moves toward in his ministry: He moves outward toward tax collectors, calling one of them to be his disciple and eating at his table. He moved toward Samaritans, telling a story that portrayed them in a positive light, and taking the time to engage a Samaritan woman in a life changing conversation at a well. He moved toward prostitutes, making such a difference in the life of one that she came and anointed his feet with her grateful tears. He moved toward lepers, touching them clean when everyone else would run. He moved toward the poor, stopping to listen to Blind Bartimaeus' cry when everyone else thought he had better things to do. He moved toward children, allowing them to sit with him when others wanted to send them away. In his whole life Jesus makes a disciplined effort, a devoted effort to move toward others. He makes the outward move towards people who are different, unfamiliar, unclean, unnoticed.

Watching Jesus, we learn that our spiritual life, our life with God involves not only inward disciplines and inward habits, it needs outward disciplines too. You can't stay in the deserted place praying and communing with God. You can't just stay in Capernaum. You can't let your faith life stay inside of a set of comfortable relationship networks where everyone is safe and predictable and more or less like you. Faith calls you outward. "You were sent for this purpose."

Consider all the words of Jesus that call us to outwardness. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus tells his followers, you are the salt of the earth! You are the light of the world! Outward. When the disciples are called, they are called to be fishers of other people. Outward. When Jesus gives the disciples their first independent assignment, he doesn't say, go home and study Torah and pray; he sends them, two by two, into the towns and villages to meet the world's needs and preach the kingdom. Outward. Jesus told parables like the parable of the sheep and the goats where clothing the naked and welcoming the stranger is seen as meeting Jesus. Outward. Just before he leaves this earth in his ascension, Jesus gave us the great commission: go into the world and make disciples of all nations. Outward. And then there's the whole sweep of the story in Luke and Acts. Luke starts with the light of the world confined to a stable in Bethlehem but ends his second volume with the gospel spreading out of Jerusalem up through Samaria and Galilee and Syria and Asia Minor, through Greece, down to Ethiopia and even all the way to Rome. Outward.

Now, what does that mean? Does that mean we are all called to leave our towns and head out to remote regions of the globe to do evangelism? No. That's not what outwardness means. It will mean that for some members of the body. It meant that for the apostle Paul, it meant that for Johanna Veenstra, and Lee Huizenga. But for most of us the habit of outwardness in our faith will take a very different form.

I think it was 15 years ago that Calvin University hosted the World Conference of Reformed Churches. There was one Sunday where my former church, Woodlawn, was designated to host some delegates from the conference and various households were asked to welcome delegates into our home for the afternoon. The Jonker household was one of those. We were assigned to entertain 6 Brazilians, 3 men and 3 women. Now, as the day approached, let me be clear that I had mixed feelings about our commitment. We agreed to do it months earlier, but when the Sunday came and I looked at all the other things I had to do, there was part of me that was saying, "Man, I wish I could just have the afternoon to myself, relax after the morning sermon. Maybe catch a nap." But we'd made a commitment and so I disciplined myself to outwardness and the welcome of these strange Brazilian visitors in the middle of a busy day.

It was a wonderful afternoon. Brazilians are warm, effusive people, and so they plunged right into our social time. They told us all about themselves, they wanted to know everything about us, within an hour they were inviting us to come to Brazil to see the 2016 World Cup. They talked about church and wanted to know everything about my church and the Christian Reformed Church.

They also told me all about their church. It was a tiny Presbyterian church with only 50 churches in it. A 50-church denomination. And not only is it small, it runs very differently from ours. Out of the 50 congregations, only 3 – only 3! – were led by full time professional pastors. The ministers in all the other churches have to support themselves with other jobs and then write their sermons. Two of the pastors were there. Both of them had full-time jobs outside of their work. And yet they were all so dedicated to what they were doing. One pastor talked to me for an hour straight about people from the Spiritist religions of Brazil and how he had made friends with them and how many of them had started to worship with them and had become drawn to the grace and love of Jesus.

After 3 hours of warm and sometimes raucous fellowship, Brazil's World Cup Soccer game came on TV and we watched it with them until it was time to go to the big evening service in the Van Noord arena. Before we left, they insisted that we have our picture taken together and after the picture was taken one of the pastors said, "I will pray! I will pray!" and, while we stood in a circle in our backyard, he prayed a heartfelt prayer, entirely in Portuguese. I have no idea what he said, but it was wonderful.

The whole afternoon was a joy! This outward discipline, in this case the discipline of hospitality to strangers, was an incredible experience, a faith-building experience. And, please note, it was a faith strengthening experience for me!! God calls us to be outward with our faith, but the message here is not, "Well I order you to be outward with your faith, and I know that's a pain, but you must do it for other people's sake." This outwardness is strength and growth for you too!!!

I think it gives us strength in a couple of ways. First, it's just fun to meet other people, there's a joy in learning new things and it gives you a broader sense of the world. You see the world in a different way. But second, moving out helps you to see yourself in a new way. When I heard that these pastors had other jobs and these churches were constantly scrimping and barely hanging on, I looked at my life and my job and our church and I realized how unbelievably privileged we are. It made me deeply thankful for the stability we have, and it made me ashamed about times I might have complained about how busy I am. Outwardness certainly blesses others, but it grows you too.

There are a hundred other ways of practicing outwardness besides inviting Brazilians to lunch. You could invite the new family in your neighborhood, that Muslim family, you could invite them to dinner. You could join a local club, a bowling league, a quilting group, and make an effort to get to know some of the people there. And when you get there, don't just gravitate to the people who are most like you, don't show up and say, "Oh, that person over there has a Dutch name, I think I'll sit next to him," get to know someone different. You could volunteer in our Kids Hope program and find yourself in Congress school once a week – many of those children have lives very different from ours. You could do something as simple as inviting a few

other couples from church over to your place for dinner or dessert. You could risk the adventure of getting to know another person.

“Jesus says, “I must proclaim the good news of the Kingdom to the other cities as well; for I was sent for this purpose.” Inward disciplines — Outward disciplines. This is Jesus’ rhythm: breathing in and breathing out. This is the life the Spirit works in us, this is human life fully lived.

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