

## **“Driven to Distraction”**

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Scripture: Matthew 6:1-6

*“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.”*

By all accounts, Tim Tebow seems to be a sincere Christian. I guess he missed this scripture passage from Matthew’s gospel. Whether it’s his famous kneeling prayers on the football field or writing “John 3:16” into his eye black, Tebow makes no secret of his faith. Critics and supporters have debated Tebow’s motives and the effectiveness of this kind of evangelism. What’s in his heart, God only knows.

We sturdy, reserved New England Congregationalists are unlikely to offend God or neighbors with effusive public prayer or showy piety. That’s not our style. Yet we might still take something from Jesus’ words to his first disciples here in the sixth chapter of Matthew’s gospel.

*“But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”*

Private, solitary prayer to the God “who sees in secret” will be rewarded, Jesus says. So why, for so many, is that so hard to do?

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In 1845, William Walford, a blind shoemaker and sometime preacher composed the lyrics to the hymn “Sweet Hour of Prayer” in his memory and shared it with a visiting friend who wrote them down and submitted them to a magazine, *The Observer*. After it was published, William Bradbury composed the tune in 1861, and it became a popular hymn. Nothing seemed unusual, then, about spending a whole hour in prayer, making “all my wants and wishes known.” Today, the thought of trying to spend a whole hour in private, solitary prayer would drive many to distraction.

When we have, however, taken time to spend time attending to God—whether through prayer, meditation, a walk through nature—whatever gets us closer to God, we know the rewards are great, as Jesus promised. After praying, we may feel a sense of warmth and comfort; reduction of stress and worry; decreased blood pressure; an inspiration to act; clarity about a decision; and feelings of joy. People tell me about the incredible feeling they have when they know people are praying for them. You’d think we’d want to be praying alone all day and need to be torn away from our solitary rooms to get some work done!

And yet, for many, prayer is difficult, and especially solitary prayer. Why? Part of the problem may be that we don't want to talk to God for fear of judgment. But more of the time, I think, it's just an addiction to distraction. Solitary, silent time to even hear ourselves think has been edged out of our lives—let alone time to talk with God.

This week, pay attention to the noise. Actually write down, if you dare, the number of minutes you spend in a day without some kind of noise—the radio, the tv, other people, the ding of a new email arriving. It used to be we might get some moments of solitude in the car, but that's changing too. We are being driven to distraction.

(I generally try not to be too much of a scold in my sermons, but today I'm going to allow myself a "preachy" digression: I know none of us does this, but for people who text while driving: Stop it! God sees you in secret, even if everyone else doesn't, and you are going to hurt yourself or someone else. Stop it!)

Perhaps we're not being driven to distraction—we're actually driving ourselves there. No one is making us live in constant noise and communication 24/7. We are doing it to ourselves. Why?

There is actually a new acronym that attempts to explain it: FOMO. We can't put down our phones and devices and turn off the TV for a simple reason: FOMO. Fear of missing out. Now that we can know in real time what the news is—world news, national news, personal news—we are afraid that we will miss something.

And we *are* missing out. But we aren't missing out on a party or the latest status update or the 53<sup>rd</sup> repetition of the gaffe made during a press conference. We are missing something of great importance and depth and comfort:

*"Go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."*

For many of us, it will be too much to try an hour of prayer, particularly if this practice is new. Start small if you need to. Take ten minutes, find a comfortable spot where you will not be interrupted. Turn off the phone. The world can do without you for ten minutes. If praying seems too much, just sit and look and be quiet. The next time, try twelve minutes. You can set a timer so you don't have to keep looking at your watch.

If you can't just sit there, copy out a psalm. Or walk. But turn your mind and heart to God; and God, who sees in secret, will reward you.

Take the wheel and take control of your life and your time and how you spend it. The rewards will be very evident to you here and now.

Let us pray: God, teach me wisdom in my secret heart. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and put a new and right spirit within me, I pray. Teach me to pray, day by day. Amen.