

Intro

How are you doing right now? What are you thinking? How do you feel?

Maybe you're discouraged. The isolation is wearing you down. You're tired of being alone. You have friends and family you want to see. There's people you want to care for but you can't. You can't stand being stuck in a house. There's places you can't go. You had plans. The trip you booked months ago, our Easter service, family gatherings, seasonal spring activities, or sporting activities. They've all been cancelled. And all you can do is stay at home. Your way of life is totally disrupted.

Maybe you're enjoying it. People tire you out. You can finally relax. No rushing from activity to activity. You can finally chill out. You love being at home. You can finally binge-watch that TV show. It's a lot more convenient to stay home anyways. You can even stay in pajamas all day long. You're happy how things are turning out. What you fear is going back to work.

Today we ask this question:

BIG QUESTION: How should we think about isolation?

PRAY

Body

Points 1-3 present general principles. Points 4-10 reveal how isolation affects ourselves as individuals and the church as a whole (corporately).

Point 1: Isolation is not good

Explanation

Genesis 2:18 Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him."

Then the LORD brought animals before Adam. But they weren't suitable companions for Adam. So it was said, "But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him (Gen 2:20)." So God gave Adam Eve, because it isn't good for us to be isolated from other humans.

This is not to say that unmarried people are incomplete. Some are gifted for singleness (1 Cor 7:6-7). And even the married spend a significant period of their life single: our youth and the time before we were married. And at some point the married lose their spouse and become single. My point is this: all of us need human companionship and marriage isn't the only option. Isolation isn't good because we need human companionship.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. ¹⁰ For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! ¹¹ Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? ¹² And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him- a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

Isolation is not good because more is accomplished by groups of people. Isolation is not good because the isolated have no one to care for their needs. Isolation is not good because the isolated have no one to protect them. We were made for community.

Point 2: Isolation occurs because of sin

Explanation

Proverbs 18:1 Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound judgment.

Isolating ourselves from others is both selfish and unwise. In selfishness we disregard the needs of others. In foolishness we forget our need for others. But why do we hide from others?

Because sin entered the world. Before Adam ate of the forbidden tree, there was no sin. Animosity didn't exist. Neither did self-isolation. After the fall we usually self-isolate because of our sinful desires, or because we've been sinned against. We might isolate because we're afraid to have our sin found out. We might isolate because someone did something to us and we're afraid to be hurt by people again. Or we might isolate because we're insecure: we're so afraid of what people will think of us so we avoid social situations. In other words, we isolate because we're ruled by the fear of man. Whatever the case, isolation prevents us from living out the second greatest commandment: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself (**Matt 22:39**)."

And when we isolate we reject our duty to care for our brothers and sisters in Christ:

Philippians 2:3-4 Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

How can we look out for the interests of others when we purposely avoid them by isolating ourselves?

Application

A word of caution. I am not condemning forced isolation that's out of your control. Like the Governor's current stay at home order. Heeding the Governor's order is obeying Romans 13 and being a good citizen. Or health concerns that prevent you from gathering. Like recovery from injury, illness, or being unable to drive. In these cases others need to come to you. The problem is when we say to ourselves, "**me before we.**"

Point 3: Isolation occurs because of the curse

Our present distress, the Coronavirus, results from the curse. Before Adam ate of the forbidden tree, death didn't exist. Sickness didn't exist. And when the curse is lifted, all death and pain will be gone (Rev 21:4; 22:3). Living in a post-Genesis 3 world, we experience isolation because of the curse: death of a loved one, injury, inability to drive, catastrophic natural disasters, and forced isolation because of infectious disease. This is nothing new:

Leviticus 13:45-46 "The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean.' ⁴⁶ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp.

Infectious diseases that result from the fall force us to isolate.

Point 4: Isolation hinders our spiritual growth

Explanation

Proverbs 27:17 Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.

When we spend time with our fellow believers we are sharpened. Positive effects are in view here. An iron knife is sharpened (a good thing) because of its contact with a sharpening iron. Likewise, when we spend time with our brothers and sisters in Christ, we grow in wisdom and character. On the other hand, when we neglect Christian fellowship we miss out on good things, like increased wisdom and improved character.

- individual effects = I don't grow & corporate effects = I don't help others grow = everyone suffers when isolation happens

Point 5: Isolation prevents mutual encouragement

Explanation

Hebrews 10:23-25 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Why, under normal circumstances, should we always gather as congregation on Sunday mornings? Because when we choose not to gather we miss out on Christian fellowship. Specifically, we don't receive encouragement when we stay home. Like encouragement to endure trials, to love others, and to do good works. On the other hand, when we don't gather others miss out on the encouragement we could provide. Again, everyone suffers when we isolate.

This passage assumes two things. First, we need the encouragement of other believers to press on in our faith, act in love, and do good works. Second, when we gather on Sunday mornings, one thing we do is encourage others. Consider that one reason why we gather on Sunday mornings is to encourage our fellow believers. Our fellowship time after the service is a good time to do this. Is someone struggling? Search them out and offer encouragement. This is something the Hebrews author thinks is the duty of all believers, not just the elders. How can you do this today? Call someone.

Point 6: Isolation prevents us from serving one another

Explanation

Galatians 6:10 So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

If we isolate from one another, how can we serve one another? What good am I missing when I isolate? What good am I withholding from others when I isolate? Everyone suffers when we isolate.

Point 7: Isolation severs us from the protection of church discipline

Explanation

Church discipline is that duty of the whole church membership to correct wayward members when they are going astray. Both for the spiritual good of the sinning member and for the church's reputation in the community. And if necessary, church discipline culminates in church membership being revoked. The PCC Constitution says this:

“The first priority in any church discipline proceeding will be the restoration of the offending member. It is not our intent to punish, but rather to promote the spiritual growth and fellowship of this body.”

So it's our duty to look out for one another. We challenge those who are going astray and neglecting duties. We encourage those who are wavering in their faith (Heb 10:23-25). We help those who are struggling. And we do this with patience.

1 Thessalonians 5:14 And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.

We gently seek to help our brothers and sisters to turn from sin, all the while watching over our own hearts.

Galatians 6:1 Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.

What's my point? When we isolate ourselves we remove ourselves from the protection of the church. We distance ourselves from those who can do us spiritual good. On the other hand, when we isolate ourselves from the church we fail to exercise watchfulness over our fellow believers. Everyone suffers when we isolate.

Point 8: Isolation severs Christian unity

Explanation

Ephesians 4:1-3 I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Unity in the local church is something to be maintained. In other words, it already exists. Our role is not to create unity. No, our role is to preserve the church's unity, whether by refraining from divisive actions or being a peacemaker. But what happens when we isolate ourselves from the local church? We don't exercise patience. We don't exercise love. And we don't work to preserve the church's unity. We miss out on the joys of Christian fellowship. And we don't work for the joy of our fellow believers. Everyone suffers when we isolate.

Point 9: Isolation severs us from pastoral care

Explanation

I say us because even we elders need pastoral care.

Acts 20:28 Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

Elders (overseers) are tasked with caring (Greek verb "to pastor") for the flock assigned to them.

Hebrews 13:17 Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

And we elders keep watch over your soul. We do this with the knowledge that one day we will stand before God to give an account of how we cared for your souls. What's the point? When you isolate, you distance yourself from pastoral care. Isolation does not serve you well.

Point 10: Isolation hinders the local church's witness

Explanation

One of Palermo Christian Church's greatest evangelistic tools is our love for one another.

John 13:34-35 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

What happens when we isolate? We give up on loving our fellow believers in the local church. And as a result, the church's witness is hindered: the world doesn't see believers loving one another in counter-cultural ways. When we isolate, we detract from the beauty of the local church.

I think you get the point. Isolation isn't good. Our present isolation stems from the curse. Isolation is damaging and harmful. Isolation restricts us from receiving the blessings of Christian fellowship. Isolation restricts us from giving of ourselves to others. Isolation prevents us from living out the one another commands. Everyone suffers when we isolate.

Application Points

I've talked about the negatives of self-imposed isolation. But what about forced isolation? How should we think and feel right now?

1) Don't get comfortable

We cannot become content with online services or Zoom meetings. This is a temporary necessity in order to maintain community. This is not God's ideal. This is a temporary necessity in order to maintain community edification. This is not God's ideal. Is laying on your couch to watch a service from home convenient? Absolutely. It's a lot easier for my wife to sit around at home with the kids in their pajamas. Need a diaper? Need baby wipes? Everything's right there conveniently. Can watching service from home make us lazy? Absolutely. And laziness isn't a Christian virtue.

Proverbs 26:13-15 The sluggard says, "There is a lion in the road! There is a lion in the streets!" ¹⁴ As a door turns on its hinges, so does a sluggard on his bed. ¹⁵ The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; it wears him out to bring it back to his mouth.

Don't get comfortable with convenience! Perhaps this extended period of isolation will show us how tragic isolation is?

2) Long for in-person fellowship

Instead of becoming content with convenience, we should be feeling real agony. We should long to see our brothers and sisters in Christ in person. This should hurt. If you are discouraged by prolonged stay at home orders and by public gathering restrictions, realize this is how you should feel. Being created in God's image, we were made for companionship. Having placed us in the body of Christ, the church, the

Spirit has made us one with other believers (1 Cor 12:12-14). Therefore, we long for in-person fellowship. This is right and natural. Perhaps this extended period of isolation will create in us a hunger for Christian fellowship? Perhaps this season will give us compassion for shut-ins who have to live like this year round?

3) Turn to God

What should we do during this season where we long to reunite with our brothers and sisters? Turn to the one who united us in the first place. If discouraged, turn to God. If longing for companionship, turn to God. Under normal circumstances our schedules might crowd God out. But not at this time. So let him speak to you from his word. Let his words bring comfort and direction. And pour out your heart to him in prayer. Let him take your burdens. Perhaps our extended isolation and break from busyness is an opportunity to commune with God?

4) Reach out when we can't meet programmatically

Don't give up and despair. Make the best of the present season. Make use of the technologies available to approximate the public gathering of the local church as best possible. We still need people to rejoice with us. We still need people to weep with us. We still need people to encourage us. We still need people to challenge us. We still need the body of Christ. So make phone calls. Stillman drive-in calls. Send emails. Send texts. Send letters. Participate in the Facebook group page. Conduct meetings over Zoom. Do what you can. We still need each other. Perhaps our extended isolation will show us how much we need each other?

5) Redeem the time

For many of us, God has given us an extended period of release from busyness. We now have free time at our disposal. What should we do? Redeem the time. Read a good Christian book that will feed your soul. Use this time to gear up for your future ministry in the church. Do you teach children? Study up on it. Do you lead a small group? Prepare for future meetings. Establish the daily discipline of reading God's word and praying. Pray God's word = pray based on what you've read. Strengthen your marriage. Encourage others in the church. Meet needs you're aware of. Get projects done. Perhaps God has given us this time to do something?

Conclusion

How should we think about isolation? Isolation is not good. Isolation hinders others from blessing you, and it hinders you from blessing them. Isolation severs us from the local church. **Everyone suffers when we isolate.** So fight isolation as best you can. Refuse to despair by maintaining contact with one another. Engage your despair by communing with God. Use your time well. And long for the time when we can meet together again.