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Renew

A BASIC GUIDE FOR A PERSONAL RETREAT

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RENEW: A BASIC GUIDE FOR A PERSONAL RETREAT

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*"A good journey begins knowing where we are
and being willing to go somewhere else."*

—Richard Rohr¹

Section 1

The NEED for a RETREAT

Life is busy with lots of demands, and many would acknowledge that they are overextended, exhausted and stressed out. In fact, some would say they don't even have time to catch their breath. In the Gospels, there are different accounts of Jesus and the disciples deliberately leaving behind the demands of life and retreating to a quiet place in order to be renewed. This reinforces the concept that a retreat is a necessity for each one of us in today's world.

The popular concept of a retreat today is somewhat different than the one used by Jesus. For example, if you are engaged in youth ministry, the term "retreat" brings to mind the task of organizing endless activities to keep the youth occupied, to the extent that most leaders and participants return home exhausted. A retreat for adult members of a church congregation usually includes Bible study, teaching and extended periods of corporate worship. In some instances a retreat is viewed as an opportunity to work together with a particular group on some project related to its faith community.

Throughout his life and ministry Jesus would regularly retreat to a quiet place for extended periods of time just to be alone with the Father. Before he began his ministry, we are told, he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where he fasted and prayed for 40 days (Matthew 4:1–11). Mark gives us a glimpse into the demands of just one day of Jesus' ministry. He went to Capernaum, where he taught in the synagogue, cast out evil spirits, healed Simon's mother-in-law from a fever, and then in the evening, when the sick and demon-possessed came to the home of Simon Peter, he healed them as well. It was a busy day, to say the least. The next morning the disciples were looking for Jesus, but Jesus could not be found. He had risen early that morning to go to a lonely place, where he prayed (Mark 1:1–39). As you read through the Gospels you will discover that retreating to places of silence and solitude was a regular practice for Jesus (Matthew 14:23; Matthew 21:17; Luke 22:39–46).

Not only did Jesus practice this discipline, it was also a practice that he wanted his disciples to embrace in their ministry. When Jesus commissioned the disciples, he told them to preach the message "The kingdom of heaven is near." And they were to heal the sick, raise the dead and cast out demons (Matthew 10:7–8). They faced a challenging ministry, to say the least. When they went out to minister, they saw God transforming the lives of people as they preached the gospel, healed the sick and cast out demons (Mark 6:12–13). When they returned from their assignment, they reported everything they had experienced to Jesus. In fact, they were so excited that they wanted to go out immediately and continue the ministry, but Jesus told them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest" (Mark 6:31). In essence Jesus was telling them to "come away and be

renewed.” In other words, allow God to do in you what he will ultimately do through you.

Sadly, there are many who feel their lives are unravelling, and they are exhausted and stressed out. As the demands of life and ministry increase, some try to work longer and harder to accomplish the tasks that are before them. Many of these tasks may be good and legitimate, but the price many pay is that their inner life withers because it is neglected.

Take a few minutes to think about what might happen if you took an extended period of time—perhaps one or two days—away from your normal routine in the next month just to be alone with God. What do you think would happen? I am sure most would come up with many positive answers, such as “I would be less stressed out” or “I would be able to have a greater sense of peace in my life” or “I would be able to think more creatively” or “I would be able to hear the voice of God more clearly.”

In spite of all the good reasons we can think of, we can also come up with just as many good excuses not to take time to be away. “I am too busy” or “I don’t think I can be alone and quiet by myself” or “I will do it later, when my life settles down.”

You will need to decide what you will do. You can listen to the voice of your excuses, or you can listen to the voice of God. The purpose of a retreat is to enable you to be free from outside distractions so you can hear what God wants to say to you. If you find that your life is being pulled in many different directions, it can be a time to refocus and get a new sense of direction and purpose. For others, time alone will enable them to experience God more intimately by simply being in his presence. For everyone, it will be an opportunity to rest and to be renewed. The Old Testament prophet Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal and won a decisive victory over them.

However, he was exhausted from the encounter and fled to the wilderness. It was during his time in the wilderness that God provided for all of his needs and enabled him to continue the journey (1 Kings 18–20).

¹ Richard Rohr, quoted in Ruth Haley Barton, *Invitation to Solitude and Silence: Experiencing God's Transforming Presence* (Downers Grove: IVP 2004), 25.