

Solitude

Solitude is the practice of being alone. While you have already spent some time in solitude as part of your extended times with God, it is crucial to learn the value of solitude as a discipline to be practiced on a regular basis. Solitude needs to have priority among the various disciplines. Dallas Willard says, “Of all the disciplines of abstinence, solitude is generally the most fundamental in the beginning of the spiritual life, and it must be returned to again and again as that life develops.”ⁱ It will provide the foundation for the practice of many other disciplines, such as silence and prayer.

The practice of solitude is easily passed over in the Bible. Many of the most prominent characters in Scripture made solitude a part of their lives. Jesus practiced solitude throughout his life and ministry. At the beginning of his ministry he went to the wilderness for an extended period of fasting and prayer (Matthew 4:1-2). He sought solitude prior to preaching (Mark 1:35-39), after he had healed a leper (Mark 1:45), after hearing about the death of John the Baptist (Matthew 14:13), after his followers had been involved in ministry (Matthew 14:23), and before he chose the disciples (Luke 6:12-16). At the end of his life he sought solitude in the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36ff).

What makes solitude so important? John Ortberg says, “Solitude is the one place where we can gain freedom from the forces of society that will otherwise relentlessly mold us.”ⁱⁱ Henri Nouwen describes solitude as “the furnace of transformation.”ⁱⁱⁱ If Jesus needed time to be with the Father, how much more do we need this time?

The first question people usually have when learning about solitude is: “What do we do during the time?” The best answer to this question is: “Nothing.” While at first you might feel like this is a waste of time, allow these feelings to cause you to consider that your worth is not determined by you always needing to keep busy or be “doing” something. For many it is a temptation to take things with them such as books, tapes, a “to-do” list, your calendar, or even that project you’ve been meaning to get done. You might even be tempted to bring your laptop computer! One of the most important principles to grasp is that solitude is not about doing something . . . it is about *not* doing something. Richard Foster says: “What we must clearly understand and underscore is that our real task [in solitude] is to create a space in our lives where God can reach us. Once that space has been created we wait quietly, expectantly. From this point on, the work belongs to God.”^{iv}

In solitude, it is important to listen . . . to pay attention to what comes to you. Our desire is to hear Jesus, but there will be many voices. One of the greatest challenges of solitude is to sort through these “voices” and learn to put them aside so that we can hear Jesus. A first step here might be to identify these other voices and what it is they are saying. You might even take time to write these down. If you can identify the influence these voices are having on your life, you will have a much easier time moving beyond these influences to the voice of God.

There are many ways to build the practice of solitude into your life. These include regular alone times with God, preferably on a daily basis. It is good to plan special times maybe

weekly or monthly where we can spend a few hours to a day in solitude. We also need periodic extended times, once or twice a year, where we can have several days. Don't worry if it is very difficult at first. It becomes easier or more natural each time you practice it. Like recovery from any sickness, healing takes time.

- Solitude rarely happens unless we schedule it. Therefore, the first step is to get out your calendar and schedule the time in. Determine where you might be able to spend some daily time in solitude. Schedule it just as you would an appointment. Then schedule a time where you can spend 4-6 hours alone. If possible, schedule several days where you can get away for an extended time sometime in the next 6 months.
- Think about where you feel most at peace. Some people like the beach, some like the mountains, some might be able to find it in their own back yard. It is important to note that it is usually very helpful to be out in nature, as long as weather permits. Write out several places where you might be able to spend some solitude time:
- Find a place this week where you can practice solitude in the midst of your work day. It might be finding a quiet, peaceful spot during the lunch hour. Experiment with this to see how God uses it in your life.

- ⁱ . Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of The Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 161.
- ⁱⁱ . John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 89-90.
- ⁱⁱⁱ . Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981), 13.
- ^{iv} . Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline Study Guide* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 45.

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Silence

"I have often repented of having spoken, but never of having remained silent." – Arsenius

As we begin our journey of exploring various disciplines, it is important to grasp from the very start the truth that we are given a conversational relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus wants to speak to us! He will speak to us and we can learn to recognize his voice. This is why silence becomes so crucial. There are two aspects within this discipline. The first is to pursue silence as **the absence of noise**. Many of us are so used to living in noise that we are afraid of silence. We do whatever is necessary to avoid it. Dallas Willard says "silence is frightening because it strips us as nothing else does, throwing us upon the stark realities of our life. . . . Think what it says about the inward emptiness of our lives if we must *a/ways* turn on the tape player or radio to make sure something is happening around us." ⁱ Silence helps us to cut through the voices and distractions of our noisy world and listen for God's "still small voice." It becomes rather obvious that if God's voice is "still" and "small" that we need to be both still and small in order to hear it. The best way to do this is through silence.

A second arena of this discipline is to practice the silence of **not speaking**. Silence is more easily practiced in solitude since it is more difficult to be silent in the presence of others. The Bible's admonitions about the tongue are important to consider here. James says: "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless" (James 1:26). Then a little later on he says, "Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell." (James 3:5-6).

The discipline of silence is one of three foundational disciplines in addition to solitude and prayer. Henri Nouwen has said,

*Clearly silence is a discipline needed in many different situations: in teaching and learning, in preaching and worship, in visiting and counseling. Silence is a very concrete, practical, and useful discipline in all our ministerial tasks. It can be seen as a portable cell taken with us from the solitary place to the midst of our ministry. Silence is solitude practiced in action.*ⁱⁱ

Listening is very important to the discipline of silence. You must pay attention. You must want to hear. This will not come easy for most, so you must persist with this. We often use our ears not to hear, but to sort. We listen merely to identify what is coming that we do not want to hear. Many people only hear what they assume is what they have always heard. Listening through the discipline of silence must get beyond these tendencies.

- If you want to learn the value of silence, how to recognize God's voice, and how to distinguish God's voice from the voices of others, begin by asking God to teach you about this. It is important to persist with this discipline, especially if your mind is racing. It often takes awhile for our minds to quiet down.
- To assist you in cultivating quietness, there are several practices you can experiment with. One is the devotional use of Scripture. Take a verse, such as Psalm 23:1, and repeat it silently. As you repeat it many times, emphasize different parts of the verse and let this speak to you.
- An exercise that might be helpful encourages us to listen more deeply to our surroundings. Start by sitting quietly, listening to your breathing. Then enlarge your listening to include the room you are sitting in. Slowly listen for sounds coming from other places in the building you are in. Then include the sounds outside such as birds, traffic, a lawnmower, etc. By extending the range of your listening in this way, your mind can become less obsessed with particular concerns and more sensitive to the space in which all sounds are happening.ⁱⁱⁱ
- You might attempt to spend a day using as few words as possible, and complete silence if possible. It is best to do this without telling anyone what you are doing. As you go through your day, take note of tendencies such as desiring to fill empty space with talking, how being silent aids you in listening, etc. At the end of your day you might find it helpful to write down what you observed and learned.

- If it is difficult for you to find a place of silence in the midst of your daily work and family life, you might consider getting up in the middle of the night for a short period of time.

- .ⁱ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 163.
- .ⁱⁱ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981), 30.
- .ⁱⁱⁱ Roger Housden, *Retreat – Time Apart for Silence & Solitude* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995), 5.

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