

Practicing Solitude and Silence

“For God alone my soul waits in silence, from Him comes my salvation.” Psalm 62:1

"We live in a noisy, busy world. Silence and solitude are not twentieth-century words. We have become a people with an aversion to quiet and uneasiness with being alone." Jean Fleming

Learning about the Practice:

The spiritual practice of time spent in solitude and silence has always been with us. Throughout the Old Testament we see examples: Moses met God in the desert; Elijah, running for his life, escapes to the desert, where he hears the voice of God. In the New Testament, Jesus often went to deserted places to pray and connect with God. By the Fourth Century, the desert fathers and mothers headed to the Egyptian desert to spend extended periods (often years) in solitude and silence. A common saying among the desert fathers was, “Sit in your cell and it will teach you everything.”⁹ They were serious about seeking God. Leaders in the development of Christian spirituality consistently stress the value of solitude and silence as a practice of faith. These disciplines are found among men and women, monks and activists, church leaders and reformers. Each attests to the importance and value of this practice. The message is the same: in the deserted places you meet God face to face, and find out who you really are.

Although solitude and silence are two distinct disciplines, for the sake of this discussion, I have joined them together for they enliven and complement each other. It is hard to be silent if you are not removed from activity. And being in solitude leads to silence. Dietrich Bonhoeffer sums it up well when he says, “The mark of solitude is silence, as speech is the mark of community. Silence and speech have the same inner correspondence and difference as do solitude and community. One does not exist without the other. Right speech comes out of silence, and right silence comes out of speech.”¹⁰

Surely there are times to focus on one or the other, but the combination is a powerful spiritual practice. Nouwen says, “In solitude I get rid of my scaffolding.” The “scaffolding” he is referring to are the things we do to try and “prove” we are important and accomplished.¹¹ It is in solitude I discover God loves me for *who* I am, not for *what* I do.

Preparing for the Practice:

At its heart, solitude is about *not* doing. We withdraw from conversation and the presence of others in order to connect with and listen to God.

There are numerous benefits to this practice, here are a few: to follow the example of Jesus, to hear God’s voice clearer, for spiritual and physical restoration, and to regain spiritual perspective. Being silent reminds us to be careful with our words. It helps us be more comfortable when people are quiet around us. It reminds us that being present can be as powerful as words, and when there are no words that can help, being present can. Even with these benefits, Henri Nouwen drives deeper,

“A life without a quiet center easily becomes delusional. When we cling to the results of our actions as our only way of self identification, we become possessive, defensive, and dependant on false identities. In the solitude of prayer we slowly unmask the illusion of our dependencies and possessiveness, and discover in the center of our own self that we are not what we can control or conquer but what is given us from above to channel to others. In solitary prayer we become aware that our identity does not depend on what we have accomplished or possess, that our productivity does not define us, and that our worth is not the same as our usefulness.”¹²

It is easy, in light of his words, to understand the need for solitude and silence. Nouwen also says in *The Way of the Heart*, “Solitude is the furnace of transformation. Without solitude we remain victims of our society and continue to be entangled in the illusions of the false self.”¹³ Solitude is one of the deepest disciplines of the spiritual life because it crucifies our need for importance and prominence.

Engaging the Practice:

You can create places to be alone and silent before God, but it takes preparation—it won’t just happen. The practice requires finding a location, checking schedules, blocking out time, and turning off electronics.

There are two ways of practicing solitude and silence. One is to engage in this spiritual practice by taking brief periods of time when possible. Second is by planning extended periods of time where the majority of a day (or longer) can be spent in solitude and silence.

Let’s look at each way in more depth.

Brief Periods of Time:

Consider taking occasional "mini retreats" throughout each day for silence and solitude. An example of this might be taking a moment between meetings or classes to sit in silence. Or arrive early to an appointment with the express intent to find a quiet spot before it starts. Be creative. Not everything has to be complicated. Set a goal of having a time each day for silence and solitude.

Extended Periods of Solitude and Silence:

Plan for a few extended get-aways each year (a half-day, or longer). Locate special places which can be used for silence and solitude. Find them within your home, within walking distance, within a few minutes' drive, and for overnight retreats.

If you are new to silence and have only a short time to focus, set a timer and allow the timer to call you back. Otherwise, you may find yourself checking the time and sabotaging your silence.

One of the biggest obstacles to solitude and silence is the mere fact that you are purposefully not doing anything. We are not used to this, and you may start to remember all the

