

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES FOR THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Week Five: Silence and Solitude

I. Review and Introduction

Last week, we discussed the spiritual discipline of fasting, which is a Christian's voluntary abstinence from food for spiritual purposes. There are different types of fasts modeled in the Bible and, more importantly, several different biblical reasons for fasting. Jesus expected his followers to fast, though there will be no more fasting in the new heavens and new earth. Fasting reminds us that we ultimately rely on God to provide all of our needs and fasting should cause us to long for the coming of the kingdom.

This week, we will discuss the closely related disciplines of silence and solitude. Like fasting, these disciplines are countercultural, especially in a world of 24-hour news cycles, smart phones, and satellite radio. Practicing the disciplines of silence and solitude can help us to create space and get in a spiritual posture to practice many other personal spiritual disciplines, including biblical meditation and memorization, prayer, and fasting.

II. Understanding the Disciplines

Silence and solitude are often (though not always) practiced in tandem. According to Don Whitney, "silence is the voluntary and temporary abstention from speaking so that certain spiritual goals might be sought," while solitude is "voluntarily and temporarily withdrawing to privacy for spiritual purposes."¹ Whereas silence obviously involves not speaking for a period of time, more importantly, it involves listening for how the Spirit is speaking to us, especially through the Scriptures.

When we think about silence and solitude, often what comes to mind is monks living in a monastery who have taken a vow of silence. We evangelicals are generally suspicious of monasticism, and understandably so; certain elements of monastic life are spiritually unhealthy. However, the earliest monks retreated from the cities and into the deserts in order to have more freedom to seek God and pray for others. Practicing the disciplines of silence and solitude helps us to pursue the same worthy goal as the ancient monks, but without permanently renouncing life in this world or mandating extra-biblical practices.

Most of us are so busy and surrounded by so much noise and commotion that our inner selves are crowded and distracted from the things of the Lord. Often, we like things noisy. As Richard Foster reminds us, "One reason we can hardly bear to remain silent is that it makes us feel so helpless. We are so accustomed to relying upon words to manage and control others."² Whether we like all the noise or not, the distractions around us make it difficult sometimes to "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth" (Col. 3:2).

Silence and solitude are disciplines that aid us in the battle for spiritual-mindedness. In fact, it might be best to approach silence and solitude as intentional conduits for channeling spiritual-mindedness, lest we find ourselves simply enjoying a little peace and quiet (which is great, but is

not a spiritual discipline!). The Bible highlights the importance of silence and solitude—especially in the life of Jesus.

III. The Disciplines in the Scriptures

The Goal of all Spiritual Disciplines

Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe. (1 Tim. 4:7b-10)

Our Words are Powerful and are Often Misused

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.

How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. (James 3:1-12)

Silence Can Help Us Learn Better When and How to Speak

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.... a time to keep silence, and a time to speak (Ecc. 3:1, 7b)

Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few. (Ecc. 5:2)

Silence Can Be an Act of Worship

“Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!” (Psa. 46:10)

For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from him. (Psa. 62:5)

But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.” (Hab. 2:20)

Be silent before the Lord GOD! For the day of the LORD is near. (Zeph. 1:7a)

Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord, for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling. (Zech. 2:13)

Jesus Often Prayed in Solitude

But when 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. (Matt. 6:6)

And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone. (Matt. 14:23)

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I go over there and pray." (Matt. 26:36)

And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. (Mark 1:35)

In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God. (Mark 6:31)

But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities. But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray. (Luke 5:15-16)

Jesus Fasted in Solitude

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. (Matt. 4:1-2)

For forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days. And when they were ended, he was hungry. (Luke 4:2)

Paul Prepared for His Mission in Solitude

But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. (Gal. 1:15-17)

IV. Practicing the Disciplines

Don Whitney suggests a number of different reasons believers should practice the disciplines of silence and solitude:³

- To follow Jesus's example
- To minimize distractions in prayer
- To express worship to God
- To express faith in God
- To be physically and spiritually restored

- To regain a spiritual perspective
- To seek the will of God
- To learn to control the tongue

As we seek to practice silence and solitude, we should remember two important caveats. First, how these disciplines are practiced will not look the same with every person. The homeschooling mother has a different daily schedule than the professor; the high school student has a different schedule than the accountant (especially during tax season!); the waitress has a different schedule than the retiree; the landscaper has a different schedule than the lawyer. The important thing is to find an intentional practice that works for you and do it in faith, trusting the Lord will use the practice to make you more like Christ.

Second, these disciplines need to be separated out, as much as possible, from our personality-based preferences. Being around people energizes extroverts. For this reason, they need to approach silence and solitude as means of getting out of their “comfort zone” to cultivate their walk with Christ. Being in quiet places away from crowds “recharges” extroverts. For this reason, they need to approach silence and solitude in an overtly spiritual manner and not just in a way that appeals to their desires. For both the introvert and the extrovert, the key to practicing these disciplines faithfully is *spiritual intentionality*.

There are many different ways to practice silence and solitude. Most Christians can regularly work at least some of these into their schedule.

- For those who work outside the home: drive to work with the radio off a couple of days a week (pray, meditate, memorize)
- For stay-at-home parents: arrange a weekly “solitude swap” with another stay-at-home parent (I watch your kids, you watch mine)
- For those with a flexible work schedule: plan a weekly or monthly “mini-retreat” (two hours with your Bible, a pen, and a legal pad)
- For those with uncommitted vacation time: plan an annual overnight retreat (Ridgecrest and Camp Caraway are both in NC)
- For those who enjoy walking: take a solitude hike at a local park (pray, meditate, memorize, and exercise)
- For those who shower and use the restroom: make your bathroom a retreat center (seriously—it worked for Martin Luther)
- *For all of us*: create space for a daily quiet time (your daily dose of solitude and often silence)

V. Recommended Resources

Books

Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, 2nd ed. (HarperSanFrancisco, 1998). Chapter 7.

Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 2nd ed. (NavPress, 2014). Chapter 10.

Online Resources

JoHanna Reardon, “Quiet Your Soul,” *Today’s Christian Woman* (October 2010), available online at <http://www.todayschristianwoman.com/articles/2010/october-issue/quiet-your-soul.html>.

Charles R. Swindoll, “Solitude: A Vital Factor in Growing Closer to God,” *Insights* (January 2000): 1–2), available online at <http://www.christianity.com/11565368/>

Notes:

¹ Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 2nd ed. (NavPress, 2014), pp. 224–25.

² Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, 2nd ed. (HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), pp. 100–01.

³ Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, pp. 226–38.