

Formed in Christ: A Study of the Practices of Following Jesus

Week 4: *Silence & Solitude*¹

REVIEW

“Grace is opposed to earning, not to effort” (Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission*).

“We must seek out ways to live and act in union with the flow of God’s Kingdom life that should come through our relationship with Jesus” (Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission*).

INTRODUCTION

“All men’s miseries derive from not being able to sit in a quiet room alone” (Blaise Pascal).

“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” (Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 161).

I. What is SILENCE & SOLITUDE?

a. Definition

“The Discipline of silence is the voluntary and temporary abstention from speaking so that certain spiritual goals might be sought...Solitude is the Spiritual Discipline of voluntarily and temporarily withdrawing to privacy for spiritual purposes” (Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 184).

“In solitude, we purposefully abstain from interaction with other human beings, denying ourselves companionship and all that comes from our conscious interaction with others” (Willard 160).

i. Silence and solitude are complementary practices.

“Silence completes and intensifies solitude...Silence is the way to make solitude a reality” (Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 29).

“Silence means quietness, freedom from sounds except natural ones like breathing, bird songs, and wind and water gently moving. It also means not talking. Silence completes solitude, for without it you cannot be alone. You remain subject to the pulls and pushes of a world that exhausts you and keeps you in bondage, distracting you from God and your own soul. Far from being a mere absence, silence allows the reality of God to stand in the midst of your life” (Willard, *The Great Omission*).

ii. Silence and solitude often accompany prayer.

¹ Works consulted: Willard, *The Great Omission*; Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*; Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*; Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*; Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*; Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*.

“Solitude and silence can never be separated from the call to unceasing prayer” (Nouwen 53).

“The practice of solitude involves scheduling enough uninterrupted time in a distraction-free environment that you experience isolation and are alone with God. Solitude is a ‘container discipline’ for the practice of other spiritual disciplines” (Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 111).

iii. Silence and solitude go hand-in-hand with fellowship & community.

“Let him who cannot be alone be aware of community....Let him who is not in community beware of being alone” (Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*).

b. Prophets

3 *You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you.” (Isaiah 26:3)*

15 *For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, “In returning [or ‘repentance’] and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.” But you were unwilling, **16** and you said, “No! We will flee upon horses”; therefore you shall flee away; and, “We will ride upon swift steeds”; therefore your pursuers shall be swift.” (Isaiah 30:15-16)*

25 *The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. **26** It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. **27** It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth. **28** Let him sit alone in silence when it is laid on him;” (Lamentation 3:25-28)*

Elijah in 1 Kings 19:1-19

c. Psalms

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

1 **For God alone my soul waits in silence;** *from him comes my salvation. **2** He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be greatly shaken.” (Ps 62:1-2)*

d. Jesus

Temptation in the Wilderness

12 *The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. **13** And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.” (Mark 1:12-13)*

Before preaching:

35 **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.** **36** *And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, **37** and they found him and said to him, “Everyone is looking for you.” **38** And he said to them, “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.” **39** And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.” (Mark 1:35-39)*

After healing a leper:

*"12 While he was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy. And when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged him, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." 13 And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I will; be clean." And immediately the leprosy left him. 14 And he charged him to tell no one, but "go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as Moses commanded, for a proof to them." 15 But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities. 16 **But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.** (Luke 5:12-16)*

Before choosing the Twelve:

*"12 **In these days he went out to the mountain to pray,** and all night he continued in prayer to God. 13 And when day came, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles" (Luke 6:12-13)*

After feeding the five thousand:

*"22 Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. 23 And after he had dismissed the crowds, **he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone**" (Matthew 14:22-23)*

In the Garden of Gethsemane

"38 Then he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me." 39 And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." 40 And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, "So, could you not watch with me one hour? 41 Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." 42 Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." (Matt 26:38-42)

II. What are the challenges, difficulties, objections to practicing SILENCE & SOLITUDE?

"In a noise-polluted world, it is even difficult to hear ourselves think let alone try to be still and know God. Yet it seems essential for our spiritual life to seek some silence, no matter how busy we may be. Silence is not to be shunned as empty space, but to be befriended as fertile ground for intimacy with God" (Susan Moto).

"Silence asks for patience and waiting. And both silence and waiting make us uncomfortable. They seem so unproductive. We can't tell if we are *doing* anything in them. So when we come upon silence, we fill it. We cram it with something else we can learn or do or achieve" (Calhoun 108).

"One of our main problems is that in this chatty society, silence has become a very fearful thing. For most people, silence creates itchiness and nervousness. Many experience silence not as full and rich, but as empty and hollow. For them silence is like a gaping abyss which can swallow them up. As soon as a minister says during a worship service, 'Let us be silent for a few moments,' people tend to become restless and preoccupied with one thought: 'When will this be over?' Imposed silence often creates hostility and resentment" (Nouwen 43).

“Loneliness is inner emptiness. Solitude is inner fulfillment” (Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 96).

“Silence is frightening because it strips us as nothing else does, throwing us upon the stark realities of our life” (Willard 163).

“We are so afraid of silence that we chase ourselves from one event to the next in order not to have to spend a moment alone with ourselves, in order not to have to look at ourselves in the mirror” (Bonhoeffer quoted in Calhoun 111).

“In quietness we often notice things we would rather not notice or feel. Pockets of sadness or anger or loneliness or impatience begin to surface” (Calhoun 108).

“Times of solitude can be sweet times, but they can also be dark times when God seems to remain withdrawn and silent. We seek the Lord, but he doesn't seem to show up...Don't be afraid of the darkness of solitude. Stay with God. The Light will eventually dawn” (Calhoun 113).

III. Why should we practice SILENCE & SOLITUDE?

a. Practicing silence & solitude breaks the normal patterns into which we are locked (Rom 12:1-2).

“Many well-meaning people, to give an example, cannot succeed in being kind because they are too rushed to get things done. Haste has worry, fear, and anger as close associates; it is a deadly enemy of kindness, and hence of love. If this is our problem, we may be greatly helped by a day's retreat into solitude and silence, where we will discover that the world survives even though we are inactive. There we might prayerfully meditate to see clearly the damage done by our unkindness, and honestly compare it to what, if anything, is really gained by our hurry. We will come to understand that for the most part our hurry is really based upon pride, self-importance, fear, and lack of faith, and rarely upon the production of anything of true value for anyone” (Willard, *The Great Omission*).

b. Practicing silence & solitude creates space for other disciplines.

“Solitude is a formative place because it gives God's Spirit time and space to do deep work” (Calhoun 112).

“Indeed, solitude and silence are powerful means to grace. Bible study, prayer, and church attendance, among the most commonly prescribed activities in Christian circles, generally have little effect for soul transformation, as is obvious to any observer. If all the people doing them were transformed to health and righteousness by them, the world would be vastly changed. Their failure to bring about the change is precisely because the body and soul are so exhausted, fragmented, and conflicted that the prescribed activities cannot be appropriately engaged in and by and large degenerate into legalistic and ineffectual rituals. Lengthy solitude and silence, including rest, can make them very powerful” (Willard, *The Great Omission*).

c. Practicing silence & solitude exposes our hearts, our false self, and our idols.

“Solitude is a terrible trial, for it serves to crack open and burst apart the shell of our superficial securities” (Louis Bouyer).

“Our identity, our sense of self, is at stake...The secular or false self is the self which is fabricated, as Thomas Merton says, by social compulsions. ‘Compulsive’ is indeed the best adjective for the false self. It points to the need for ongoing and increasing affirmation. Who am I? I am the one who is liked, praised, admired, disliked, hated or despised. Whether I am a pianist, a businessman or a minister, what matters is how I am perceived by my world. If being busy is a good thing, then I must be busy. If having money is a sign of real freedom, then I must claim my money. If knowing many people proves my importance, I will have to make the necessary contacts. The compulsion manifests itself in the lurking fear of failing and the steady urge to prevent this by gathering more of the same—more work, more money, more friends” (Nouwen 10-11).

“When my sense of self depends on what others say of me, anger is a quite natural reaction to a critical word. And when my sense of self depends on what I can acquire, greed flares up when my desires are frustrated” (Nouwen 11).

“This is not an open, blatant, roaring anger, but an anger hidden behind the smooth word, the smiling face, and the polite handshake. It is a frozen anger, and anger which settles into a biting resentment and slowly paralyzes a generous heart” (Nouwen 11).

“We run off at the mouth because we are inwardly uneasy about what others think of us” (Willard 165).

“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. If we are silent, who will take control? God will take control, but we will never let him take control until we trust him. Silence is intimately related to trust” (Foster 100-101).

“A frantic stream of words flows from us because we are in a constant process of adjusting our public image. We fear so deeply what we think other people see in us that we talk in order to straighten out their understanding” (Foster 101).

“Silence is one of the deepest Disciplines of the Spirit simply because it puts the stopper on all self-justification” (Foster 101).

“In not speaking, we resign how we appear (dare we say, how we *are*?) to God. And that is hard” (Willard 165).

“In solitude I get rid of my scaffolding” (Nouwen 15).

“Solitude is the place of the great struggle and the great encounter—the struggle against the compulsions of the false self, and the encounter with the loving God who offers himself as the substance of the new self” (Nouwen 14).

d. Practicing silence & solitude brings us in touch with our true identity in Jesus, i.e. that we are beloved by God.

“We enter into solitude first of all to meet our Lord and to be with him and him alone. Our primary task in solitude, therefore, is not to pay undue attention to the many faces which assail us, but to keep the eyes of our mind and heart on him who is our divine savior. Only in the context of grace can we face our sin; only in the place of healing do we dare show our wounds; only with a single-minded attention to Christ can we give up our clinging fears and face our own true nature” (Nouwen 17).

“We can only survive solitude if we cling to Christ there. And yet what we find of him in that solitude enables us to return to society as free persons” (Willard 161).

“Solitude with God was a way Jesus remained in touch with his true identity in God” (Calhoun 112).

e. Practicing silence & solitude enables us to love others.

“What becomes visible here is that solitude molds self-righteous people into gentle, caring, forgiving persons who are so deeply convinced of their own great sinfulness and so fully aware of God’s even greater mercy that their life itself becomes ministry” (Nouwen 22).

“In a world that victimizes us by its compulsions, we are called to solitude where we can struggle against our anger and greed and let our new self be born in the loving encounter with Jesus Christ. It is in this solitude that we become compassionate people, deeply aware of our solidarity in brokenness with all of humanity and ready to reach out to anyone in need” (Nouwen 25).

- i. By teaching us how to listen to, observe, and pay attention to others.
- ii. By not being controlled by (or controlling) others.
- iii. By disciplining our speech.

IV. How can we begin to practice SILENCE & SOLITUDE?

- a. Choose a consistent time of day & place that is QUIET.**
- b. Start with 10-15 minutes every day. Set a timer so you’re not constantly looking at the clock.**
- c. Begin with a short prayer asking God to be with you.**

- d. **Focus yourself with a particular verse** (e.g. Ps 37:4; 46:10; John 14:27; 15:4, 5.)
- e. **Gently return to God as distractions arise.**
- f. **Close your time with the Lord by praying the Lord's Prayer.**
- g. **Acknowledge & address fears, cares, concerns, worries that arise *while thinking about* and *while in* solitude and silence.** (*What do I need to entrust to God's care? What was hard? What was good? Where did your mind drift?*)
- h. **Journal afterwards about the experience.**
- i. **Remember that the benefits of this practice are more often seen & experienced outside of the periods of silence themselves.**
- j. **Try for a morning or afternoon away once a month.**
- k. **Take advantage of the 'little solitudes' (Foster).**

Questions for Reflection

- How do you avoid or resist silence?
- How and when do you resist or avoid being alone?
- Where does your mind go when you are alone? What do you resort to doing when alone?
- Where do you have silence with God in your life?
- What fears, cares, concerns, worries arise in you when you think about practicing silence and solitude? What do you need to entrust to God's care?

For Further Reading

The Way of the Heart, Henri Nouwen

Ch. 10, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, Donald Whitney