

Solitude and Silence

What is Solitude and Silence:

Paul Tillich said it best when he wrote, "Language has created the word 'loneliness' to express the pain of being alone, and the word 'solitude' to express the glory of being alone."

The discipline of Solitude and Silence weans us from the noise of life that crowds our spiritual growth. We are all longing for something, looking for something to fill the emptiness we feel, and all too often we try to fill that void with noise or company, when we should instead be turning to God.

Solitude is the practice of being absent from other people in order to draw closer to God. Silence is a crucial component of solitude. While not all silence is solitude, silence is always a part of solitude.

To be sure, turning off the outside world (conversation, radios, television phones, etc) is a large part of silence, but this discipline demands more than just cutting off the audible noise; we must silence our minds as well. If Joe spends every day at the library, reading from sun up to sun down, that is not genuine silence. While it may be quiet enough to hear a pin drop in the reading room, his mind is racing with a cacophony of thoughts and images.

With such a racket and commotion going on in our lives, how do we expect to hear God? After all, when God spoke to Elijah, it was not in the form of a strong wind or earthquake, but in a gentle whisper in the midst of solitude and silence (1 Kings 19:11-13).

When we practice the discipline, we emerge out of times of solitude and silence with a better understanding of our strengths and weaknesses, and a deeper love and affection for God. The more consistently you pull away to be alone with God, the better your life will become because of the perspective you will develop.

Getting Started:

Remember that when you practice the spiritual discipline of solitude, you should spend your time in quiet and rest. As you do that, you also focus your affections on the Lord and His creation.

Begin:

- Begin by making the decision to dedicate a time of solitude and silence to God. This doesn't need to be a huge amount of time, however an hour is often helpful as you begin – it can take a while to “settle in” to the silence. Find a place where you can be silent, whether that is in your home, or elsewhere.
- This is not a time to catch up on your scheduled daily Bible reading or on anything else. In fact the first thing you should do when engaging in solitude is to remove your watch.
- Use this dedicated time to pray, and then be silent before God. After a time of silence you may wish to journal about any insights or nudges you received from the Lord.

Other Ideas:

- Form the habit of taking an hour each night for two or three nights in order to practice.
- Go to a quiet place in your house or go for a walk. Some change of location, however small, is very helpful.
- Practice solitude/silence by becoming comfortable, ultimately joyful, with being alone and silent with God.
- Remind yourself you do not need to be constantly surrounded by noise or people. You don't have to be always busy either. Practice small moments of solitude.
 - Drive with the radio and cell phone turned off. Your commute to work can be an untapped place for spiritual development in your weekly schedule. Practicing solitude while driving can make traffic a joy and your car a cathedral.
 - If you are driving alone, sit quietly in your car for a few moments upon arriving at your destination. Breathe deeply, thank God for the small blessings in your life. Don't just rush into more noise.
 - Practice being calm and mentally silent when you find yourself on hold for a phone call.
 - If you are a person who is always on the phone, occasionally resist the temptation to call someone. Remind yourself you don't have to be talking with someone all the time!
- Turn Off – Many people automatically turn on the TV or radio as soon as they get home. Resist your personal need for noise. Learn to enjoy silence.
- Rest – If you find yourself falling asleep as you try to practice solitude/silence it could be that you just need more sleep! When our bodies are exhausted, it can be difficult for us to practice. Try to focus for one week on getting enough sleep each night, then try the discipline of silence/solitude again.

Ideas for more in-depth practice:

Solitude Retreat

- Consider going on a solitude retreat; try to find a place that has gardens, fountains, statues or other forms of beautiful artwork. Many retreat centers are designed specifically for this, but it can be as simple as a secluded camp sight, or even your own back yard. For a list of Idaho retreat Centers, please visit: http://www.findthedivine.com/states/states_id.html
- Take a Bible, notebook and hymnal. Also, be sure to bring pictures of your loved ones as well as an object or image that reminds you of Jesus. By focusing on these things, your loved ones and the Lord Jesus can become steady objects of focus and love.
- If you are able, try praying on your knees for around 15 to 30 minutes, and dedicate this retreat to God. When you kneel, be sure it is in a comfortable place. If you kneel at your bedside, open the Bible to a favorite passage, read it a few times and pray it to Jesus.
- Get up and go for a long, slow, quiet walk. If possible, walk where there are beautiful sounds and sights, things that remind us of God's good creation.
- While focusing on some beautiful object or some pleasant memory, let joy and thanksgiving for the object or memory well up within you. Take a passage you have memorized and which you dearly love and pray it repeatedly to God. Use this as an occasion to pause and give thanks for specific aspects of your life.
- After an hour or so, go back to your room and journal anything that comes to your mind and heart.
- Then get back on your knees and pray, read scripture, sing, or meditate again for 30 minutes. When finished, sit in a comfortable chair and begin reading a book of the Bible. Read until you desire to stop, but be sure to pause repeatedly during your reading to pray, sing or journal.
- Move back and forth between 1) prayer and meditation on your knees; 2) sitting comfortably while journaling or reading scripture; 3) walking and pausing at beautiful sights. This will form the staple of your entire solitude retreat.
- Evaluate the last 12-18 months of your life and set some modest goals for the next six months. Be sure to include some habit changes. Make the goals reasonable.

Relevant Quotes:

- "Best of any song is bird song in the quiet, but first you must have the quiet." - Wendell Berry
- "It is a good discipline to wonder in each new situation if people wouldn't be better served by our silence than by our words." - Henri J. M. Nouwen
- "Silence is the perfectest herald of joy. I were but a little happy if I could say how much." - Shakespeare

Biblical Basis:

- Jesus spent time in solitude...
 - To prepare for his ministry (Matt 4).
 - To draw strength from His Father's presence (Matt 14:23; Mark 1:35; Luke 4:42)
 - To discern the Father's will (Luke 6:12-13)
 - To avoid misunderstanding and misguided enthusiasm (John 6:15)
- The apostle Paul, following his conversion on the road to Damascus, spent three years in the Arabian Desert and many more years in isolation while God was preparing him for missionary work with the gentiles. (Gal. 1: 15-18, 2:1-2, 8)
- "Come near to God and he will come near to you." (James 4:8)
- "After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray." (Mark 6:46)
- "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." (Mark 6:31)
- "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed." (Mark 1:35)