

# SILENCE AND SOLITUDE

"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."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer



# WHAT IS SILENCE AND SOLITUDE?

Silence is the practice of intentionally blocking out the noise of the world and attending to the voice of God in moments of quiet contemplation.


Solitude is the practice of removing yourself from busy environments and entering a quiet place where only you and God are present. Silence and Solitude, while distinct practices that can be practiced on their own, compliment one another and are often paired together.



# WHY PRACTICE IT?

On June 29th, 2007, Steve Jobs introduced the world to very first iPhone. This date not only marks the beginning of Apple's rise to power, but also marks the unofficial start of the Digital Age. While this new age has certainly provided the benefit of connection and new levels of security and safety, it has also brought with it the costs of distraction, constant input, inescapable communication, low attention spans, and the removal of any possibility of experiencing boredom. Seriously, when was the last time you were genuinely bored? While those 'costs' may not all seem that bad, they certainly can be when you realize that they often rob us of our ability to be present with others, be present with ourselves, and be present with God. In the words of Ronald Rolheiser, "we are distracting ourselves into spiritual oblivion."

Even though we've been invited into fellowship with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, the constant distractions and input that come our way can sometimes make us feel distant from God, even if that isn't true. Why? Why do we sometimes feel distant from God? Because we have to filter out God's voice from the 1000 other voices we hear in a day.



Silence and Solitude are practices based on the lifestyle of Jesus that aid us in combating feelings of disconnect with God, teach us to listen and recognize his voice, and prevent us from venturing into spiritual oblivion.

The practices of silence and solitude invite us to leave behind the competing demands of our outer world for time alone with God. In these moments of quiet, we often notice things we'd rather not notice or feel; we slow down enough to feel the emotions we've been running away from. Pockets of sadness, anger, loneliness, or impatience begin to surface. Our idols, fantasies, motivations, and addictions are all exposed in moments of quiet. When however, those moments are filled with the very presence of God, then we're given the opportunity to receive the words of God himself and leave our burdens at Jesus' feet.



# WHERE DO WE SEE JESUS ENGAGE IN THIS?

In Matthew 3, the gospel writer recounts the beginning of Jesus' public ministry at his baptism. Following this divine moment, it says that "Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil" (Matt. 4:1). Of all the things the Spirit could have led him to do— to preach, to heal, to baptize, to engage with the world— the Spirit led him to loneliness in the wilderness. Why? Why would the Spirit lead him to such a lonely place?

We often read this passage and think that despite Jesus being secluded, hungry, and vulnerable, he withstood the temptations of the devil— a reading that certainly points more to his divine nature than it does to his human nature. But what if his wilderness experience didn't make him vulnerable to temptation, but actually prepared him for it? Both Matthew and Luke record Jesus' interaction with the devil at the end of his 40 days. Now it's possible that at the end of those 40 days, Jesus was at a spiritual low— that having been in the wilderness for so long, he was most vulnerable to temptation. But it also could mean that at the end of those 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus was then prepared to withstand whatever the devil threw his way— almost as if solitary time with his Heavenly Father brought him to the height of his spiritual strength. Having prepared to withstand the devil's temptation, Jesus could then begin to fulfill the very reason for his incarnation— to exercise authority over sin, death and the devil himself.

The text isn't explicit about which is the case, but it also doesn't seem to present a Jesus that is at a spiritual low. It presents a Jesus who is quick to rebuke Satan, quick to identify his lies and deception, and quick to refuse anything the devil offered him.

Regardless of how you read Matthew 4, it's undeniable that Jesus had a habit of withdrawing to lonely places to be with his Father (Mark 1:35, Luke 5:15, Luke 6:12-13, Matthew 14:13, Matthew 14:23). In fact, the more popular, in-demand and famous he became, the more he felt the need to withdraw to a lonely and quiet place. In Mark 6:30, after Jesus and his disciples went through a stretch of ministry so busy that they didn't even have time to eat, Jesus told them that the thing they needed most was to be secluded with him. He says "come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." No matter how you look at it, withdrawing from the busyness, chaos, and loudness of the world was a part of Jesus' regular routine and is a practice that he invited his disciples to participate in alongside him. As disciples of Jesus living in a world that is hyper-connected and hyper-distracted, this is a practice that cannot fall to the wayside if we have any hope of growing in our likeness of him.



# REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What is your biggest challenge to practicing silence and solitude?  
What makes you resist it? What about it makes you ansty?
- What do you resort to doing when you're alone?
- Is there a place you enjoy being alone?
- Are you someone who needs to be productive? Does that influence your inability to practice silence and solitude?
- Do you think God values time with you in silence and solitude?
- Silence and solitude are usually the first things to go in a busy schedule. What can you remove from your cuurent schedule to create margin for these practices?

# SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

This is not a list of things you have to do, but simply a list of spiritual practices that can aid you in your moments of silence and solitude.

1. In a place where you can't be interrupted, intentionally place yourself in the presence of God. If silence is new for you, begin with ten minutes. Setting a timer can help a novice who keeps watching the clock. The timer lets you forget the time and settle into the quiet. Intentionally place yourself in the presence of God and become quiet. As you become quiet, what do you hear— voices, traffic, the radiator, your breath, the wind, your heart, distracting thoughts? Acknowledge to yourself that you notice these things, and then let them go. Continue to let the quiet deepen. Be with God. After ten minutes, reflect on what it was like for you to simply become still enough to hear the background. Try this several times a day. What happens to you? The benefits of being silent are often seen in the fruit it bears rather than in the experience of silence.

2. While doing a task, turn off any background noise and continue the task by offering it to God. Be in the present, doing what you are doing with a listening heart. What is it like for you? What distracts you?



3. Go into silence. Begin to meditate on Psalm 37:4– “Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart.” What does this verse say to you? What desires has God put into your heart? What does God say to you about your desires? Stay and wait Ask for the freedom to delight in God and for ability to know and live out your God-given desires.

4. Go into silence, placing yourself in the presence of God with the words "Here I am." As distractions come to mind, let them go by imagining they are boats floating down a river Let the current take the distractions away. Don't follow the distractions. Gently return to God repeating "Here I am." Let the current of God's Spirit carry you. What is this like for you?

5. Spend a half day in silence, either in your home or outside doing an activity: no books (other than the Bible), no music, just listen. What surfaces? How do you want to interact with God about his gift of silence?

6. Spend fifteen minutes or more alone with God while doing an activity: walk, run, drive, iron. Dedicate the time ahead of you to God. After the time is up, consider how it was for you to be alone with God. Was it hard? Good? Did God speak to you in any way?

7. Make the time you spend in the shower each morning your alone time with God. Present yourself to your Creator--all of your body, all of the dirt that has accumulated in your soul, You sent all that God has made you to be. Let the water from the shower remind you of the water of life that nourishes and changes you. Let the warmth touch you with love. If you like a cold shower, let the bracing impact call you to live your life to the full. Offer yourself to God for the day. Thank him for the alone time he spends with you.