

# Silence and Solitude

by Donald S. Whitney

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*Silence and solitude are essential disciplines for Christians to hear God's voice, express worship, and seek His will, leading to spiritual growth and holiness.*

**Scripture:** 1 Kings 19:11, Psalm 62:1, Habakkuk 2:20, Matthew 4:1, Mark 6:31, Luke 4:42, Luke 6:12, Galatians 1:17, James 1:19

**Topics:** "Spiritual Discipline", "Quiet Reflection"

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## Description

Donald S. Whitney preaches on the importance of silence and solitude in the Christian life, drawing examples from Moses, the Apostle Paul, and Jesus Christ. He emphasizes the need for balance between engaging with others for God-given responsibilities and withdrawing into disciplines of silence and solitude to hear the voice of God better, express worship, demonstrate faith, be restored physically and spiritually, seek God's will, and learn control of the tongue.

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## Transcript

There is something both appealing and transforming about silence and solitude. Other than Jesus Christ, perhaps the greatest men under each Covenant--Moses and the Apostle Paul--were both transformed through years of virtual isolation in a remote wilderness. And there are moments in our pressure-cooker lives when years of escape to some hidden place sounds wistfully compelling to the Christian spirit.

When we think with balance, we realize that it would be neither right nor desirable to be cloistered from our God-given responsibilities involving other people. Biblical reality calls us to family, fellowship, evangelism, and ministry for the sake of Christ and His Kingdom. And yet through the Holy Spirit, "deep calls to deep" (Psalm 42:7) in such a way that there is a part of our spirit that craves silence and solitude.

Just as we must engage with others for some of the disciplines of the Christian life, so there are times when we must temporarily withdraw into the disciplines of silence and solitude.

To Follow Jesus' Example

The Scriptures teach that Jesus practiced silence and solitude. Note these references:

1. Matthew 4:1 niv, "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil." The Holy Spirit led Jesus into this lengthy period of fasting and solitude.

2. Matthew 14:23, "After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone." He sent both the seeking multitudes and His disciples away so He could be alone with the Father.

3. Luke 4:42, "At daybreak Jesus went out to a solitary place. The people were looking for him and when they came to where he was, they tried to keep him from leaving them." Put yourself in Jesus' sandals for a moment. People are clamoring for your help and have many real needs. You are able to meet all those needs. Can you ever feel justified in pulling away to be alone? Jesus did. We love to feel wanted. We love the sense of importance/power/indispensability (pick one) that comes from doing something no one else can do. But Jesus did not succumb to those temptations. He knew the importance of disciplining Himself to be alone.

To be like Jesus we must discipline ourselves to find times of silence and solitude. Then we can find spiritual strength through these disciplines, as Jesus did.

#### To Hear the Voice of God Better

One of the more obvious reasons for getting away from earthly noise and human voices is to hear the Voice from Heaven better. Biblical examples of this include Elijah going to Mount Horeb where he heard the gentle whisper of God's voice (1 Kings 19:11-13), Habakkuk standing on the guard post and keeping watch to see what God would say to him (Habakkuk 2:1), and the Apostle Paul going away to Arabia after his conversion so he could be alone with God (Gal. 1:17).

Of course, it isn't absolutely necessary to get far away from noises and people in order to hear God speak, otherwise we'd never perceive His promptings in the course of everyday life, or even in public worship services. But there are times to eliminate the voices of the world in order to hear undistracted the voice of God.

Many of us need to realize the addiction we have to noise. It's one thing to listen to the television, tape player, or radio while ironing or doing other chores, but it's another thing habitually to turn one of these on immediately upon entering a room just to have sound. Even worse is to feel that it's necessary to have background noise during Bible intake or prayer.

I believe the convenience of sound has contributed to the spiritual shallowness of contemporary western Christianity. The advent of affordable, portable sound systems, for instance, has been a mixed blessing. The negative side is that now we don't have to go anywhere without human voices. As a result we are less frequently alone with our own thoughts and God's voice. Because of this, and because we are the most urban, noise polluted generation ever, we have an unprecedented need to learn the disciplines of silence and solitude.

#### To Express Worship to God

The worship of God does not always require words, sounds, or actions. Sometimes worship consists of a God-focused stillness and hush. Scriptural precedent for this includes texts like Habakkuk 2:20, "But the Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him," and Zephaniah 1:7, "Be silent before the Sovereign Lord." It's not just a silence that's enjoined, but a silence "before Him." There are times to speak to God, and there are times simply to behold and adore Him in silence.

#### To Express Faith in God

The simple act of silence before the Lord, as opposed to coming to Him in a wordy fret, can be a demonstration of faith in Him.

David displays this kind of faith in Psalm 62 where he affirms, "My soul waits in silence for God only; from Him is my salvation. He only is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold; I shall not be greatly shaken" (vv. 1-2 NASB).

Isaiah 30:15 connects silence before God with faith in Him: "This is what the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel, says: 'In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength.'" Faith is frequently expressed through prayer. But sometimes it is exhibited through a wordlessness before the Lord which, by its quiet absence of anxiety, communicates trust in His sovereign control.

### To Be Physically and Spiritually Restored

Everyone has a regular need for restoring the re-sources of both the inward and outward person. It was true even for those who lived most closely with Jesus. After spending themselves in several days of physical and spiritual output, notice the means of replenishment Jesus prescribed for His disciples, "Come with Me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest" (Mark 6:31).

### To Seek the Will of God

Perhaps one of the most common reasons believers have a time of silence and solitude with God, at least on occasion, is to discern His will about a matter. Jesus did this in Luke 6:12-13 when deciding whom to choose as the disciples who would travel with Him: "One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to Him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles."

God often makes His will clear to us in public, but there are times when He discloses it only in private. To discover it requires the disciplines of silence and solitude.

### To Learn Control of the Tongue

James 1:19 indicates a relationship between learning silence and learning control of the tongue: "My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry."

How can the discipline of silence and solitude teach tongue control? On a long fast you discover that much of the food you normally eat is really unnecessary. When you practice silence and solitude, you find that you don't need to say many things you think you need to say. In silence we learn to rely more on God's control in situations where we would normally feel compelled to speak, or to speak too much. We find out that He is able to manage situations in which we once thought our input was indispensable. The skills of observation and listening are also sharpened in those who practice silence and solitude so that when they do speak there's more of a freshness and depth to their words.

More than anything else, the disciplines of silence and solitude can be so transfiguring because they provide time to think about life and to listen to God. The plain fact is that most of us don't do that enough. Generations ago most of our forebears would have spent their days working in the fields or in the home where the only other sounds were those of nature or human voices. Without electronic media there were fewer distractions from the voice of conscience and the still, small voice of God. One of the costs of technological advancement is a greater temptation to avoid quietness. While we have broadened our

intake of news and information of all kinds, these advantages may come at the expense of our spiritual depth if we do not practice silence and solitude.

In *The Still Hour*, Austin Phelps wrote,

It has been said that no great work in literature or in science was ever wrought by a man who did not love solitude. We may lay it down as an elemental principle of religion, that no large growth in holiness was ever gained by one who did not take time to be often long alone with God.

#### Suggestions for Silence and Solitude

Here is some practical help for making silence and solitude more of a reality and a habit.

##### "Minute Retreats"

A moment at a traffic light, in an elevator, or in the line at the drive-thru bank can become a "minute retreat" when you consecrate it as a time of silence and solitude. Use the time of prayer at a meal for a spiritual pause. On the phone, see how quiet your thoughts can become while on "hold."

Of course, the key is not just taking a breath and settling down, as important as that is. What I'm advocating is looking to Christ and listening to His Spirit. It's practicing what we sing in the hymn, "Take my moments and my days, let them flow in ceaseless praise" (emphasis mine). Seize these unexpected opportunities given you and concentrate exclusively on Him and life in the Spirit. Even if you are provided with only a few seconds, even if it's not an absolutely quiet or completely solitary place, enjoy the restoration found in the conscious presence of Jesus Christ.

#### A Goal of Daily Silence and Solitude

Without exception, the men and women I have known who make the most rapid, consistent, and evident growth in Christlikeness have been those who develop a daily time of being alone with God for Bible intake, prayer, and private worship.

This daily devotional habit is not always easy to develop because we lead busy lives and have an Enemy aware of the stakes involved. Missionary martyr Jim Elliot knew of the battle: "I think the devil has made it his business to monopolize on three elements: noise, hurry, crowds. . . . Satan is quite aware of the power of silence." Our days are usually filled with more than enough noise, plenty of hurry, and demanding people. Unless we plan for daily times of solitary silence before God, these other things will rush in to fill our time like water into the Titanic.

#### Getting Away for Solitude and Silence

"Getting away" for an extended time of silence and solitude may be nothing more than finding an empty room in your church in which to spend an afternoon, an evening, or a Saturday. Or it may involve spending a night or a weekend at a retreat center, lodge, or cabin.

On some of these getaways you may want to take nothing but your Bible and a notebook. On others you might want to devour a book you believe will have a dramatic impact on your life. Such retreats are a good time to plan and evaluate your goals.

If you've never spent an entire evening, half a day, or longer in silence and solitude, you may be wondering what you would do with all that time. I would advise you to prepare a schedule either in advance or first thing upon arrival, because you'll be surprised at how quickly the time will pass. Don't feel as though you must stick slavishly to your schedule. Even if it's not an overnight event, sleep if you need to. But a plan can help you use your time for the intended purposes rather than inadvertently misspending it.

Although overnight getaways at distant places are wonderful, don't wait for times when you can go like Elijah to Mount Horeb for forty days before you start practicing silence and solitude. Remember that, generally speaking, all the spiritual disciplines, including these two, are intended for common practice in the places where we live our daily lives.

### Trade Off Daily Responsibilities

Your initial response to the suggestion of extended times in these disciplines may have been, "You don't know my situation! I have a family to feed and take care of. I can't just leave them and go off by myself for hours at a time." The most practical, inexpensive method of overcoming this problem is to ask your spouse or a friend to temporarily assume your responsibilities in order to give you time alone. Then return the favor by providing the same or another service. Mothers of young children tell me this is the best, most workable way they've found for getting extended time for these disciplines.

One word of warning: Reality can hit especially hard when you come home again. A mother of five told me she cushions the shock by preparing a meal in advance for the microwave or slow-cooker. If things are disorderly around the home when she returns, she can make her adjustment without having to worry about cooking it right away. As tough as it is sometimes to come back, the rigors of reality only prove how much we need the refreshment of silence and solitude.

### Getting Started

Will you seek daily times of silence and solitude? The busier you are, the more hectic your world, the more you need to plan daily spaces of silence and solitude.

As sleep and rest are needed each day for the body, so silence and solitude are needed each day for the soul. These disciplines have a way of airing out the mind and ironing out the wrinkles of the soul. Plan to come to the quiet every day to meet God in His Word and through prayer.

Will you seek extended times of silence and solitude? Plan for them. Put them on the calendar. The routine and responsibilities of daily living will expand to fill all your time and keep you from spending protracted periods alone with God unless you act decisively.

Will you start now? The time for silence and solitude will rarely be easy to chisel out of your schedule. The world, the flesh, and the Enemy of your soul will see to that. But if you discipline yourself to do it, your only regret will be that you didn't start sooner.

Don't expect each time of silence and solitude to produce dramatic results or intense emotions in your life. More often than not, they are emotionally simple and serene. However, as with all the spiritual disciplines, silence and solitude are profitable even though sometimes you conclude them feeling "normal." Why not begin these refreshing disciplines now?

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