

Silence and Solitude

Lord, I do not fix my eyes on health or sickness, wealth or poverty, success or failure, a long life or a short one. I know that everything has the potential of calling out of me a more loving response to your eternal life in me. Let my one desire, my single choice be this: to want and to choose what better leads to your kingdom taking root in me.

A. Biblical Foundations

1. Ps. 46:10 "Be still and know that I am God."
 - a. Be still and know that I am God
 - b. Be still and know
 - c. Be still
 - d. Be
2. Ps. 131:2 "I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with his mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me."
 - a. "This is a striking picture of my relationship with my soul. How do you wean a child? You do it by strategic disappointment. You deliberately withhold from the child what she wants so the child learns she can be master and not slave of her appetites."⁴⁵
3. Is. 30:15 "This is what the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel, says: 'Only in returning to me and resting in me will you be saved. In quietness and confidence is your strength. But you would have none of it.'" NAS
4. Jesus
 - a. Matt. 4:1-11 Christ was led of the Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days
 - b. Luke 6:12 "One day soon afterward Jesus went up on a mountain to pray, and he prayed to God all night."
 - c. Matt. 14:13 "As soon as Jesus heard the news, he left in a boat to a remote area to be alone." (The news of John the Baptist's death)
 - d. Matt. 14: 23; Mark 1: 35; Mark 6: 31; Luke 5: 16; Matt. 17: 1– 9; Matt. 26: 36– 46

⁴⁵ Ortberg, J. 163

5. Paul

- a. "A short while later, he fled to the Arabian desert for a lengthy period of time, not 'consulting with flesh and blood' (Gal. 1:16-17). In the desert isolation of the Sinaitic peninsula he continued the interchange with his Lord until he was ready to return to Damascus, to Jerusalem, and finally to his hometown of Tarsus in Asia Minor."⁴⁶
- b. "Paul's effectiveness is simply inconceivable without its extensive use of fasting, solitude, and prayer."⁴⁷

B. The Work of Silence and Solitude

1. Silence

- a. "The work of silence is the work of gently saying no to the endless stream of thoughts and feelings that make up our world in order to listen for and say yes to the thoughts and feelings that are the voice of God."⁴⁸
- b. "Silence is fasting from speaking to listen to God. Solitude is fasting from fellowship with others to be alone with God."⁴⁹
- c. "We find complete silence shocking because it leaves the impression that nothing is happening."⁵⁰
- d. "Only silence will allow us life-transforming concentration upon God."⁵¹
- e. "Silence is the way to make solitude a reality."⁵²
- f. "Though silence sometimes involves the absence of speech, it always involves the act of listening. Simply to refrain from talking, without a heart listening to God, is not silence."⁵³
- g. "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...Silence is one of the

⁴⁶ Willard, D. p. 103

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 103

⁴⁸ Wolpert, Daniel. *Creating a Life with God*. Upper Room Books. Nashville. 2003. p. 30

⁴⁹ Mulholland, R. p. 136

⁵⁰ Willard, D. p. 163

⁵¹ Ibid. p. 164

⁵² Ibid. p. 163

⁵³ Foster, R. p. 97

deepest Disciplines of the Spirit simply because it puts the stopper on all self-justification.”⁵⁴

2. Solitude

- a. “Of all the disciplines of abstinence, solitude is generally the most fundamental in the beginning of the spiritual life.”⁵⁵
- b. “(It) is the freedom to be alone, not in order to be away from people but in order to hear the divine Whisper better.”⁵⁶
- c. “The longing for solitude is the longing for God. It is the longing to experience union with God unmediated by the ways we typically try to relate to God. By ‘unmediated’ I mean a direct experience of God with nothing in between: an encounter with God that is not mediated by words, by theological constructs, by religious activity, by my own or other’s manipulations of my relationship with God. It is the practice that spiritual seekers down through the ages have used to experience intimacy with God rather than just talking about it.”⁵⁷
- d. “One of the most important lessons I have learned over the past few years is how important it is to have time and space for being with what’s real in my life— to celebrate the joys, grieve the losses, shed my tears, sit with the questions, feel my anger, attend to my loneliness. This ‘being with what is’ is not the same thing as problem solving or fixing, because not everything can be fixed or solved. Rather, it means allowing God to be with me in that place and waiting for him to do what is needed. In silence my soul waits for you and you alone, O God. From you alone comes my salvation.”⁵⁸
- e. A Place for the Soul to Come Out
 - 1) “But it’s tricky to get the soul to come out, as Parker Palmer so eloquently acknowledges. We are not very safe for ourselves, because our internal experience involves continual critique and judgment, and the tender soul does not want to risk it. Unfortunately, a lot of our religious activity is very noisy as well; oftentimes we’re just an organized group of people crashing

⁵⁴ Foster, R. p. 100

⁵⁵ Willard, D. p. 162

⁵⁶ Foster, R. p. 96

⁵⁷ Barton, R. loc. 361

⁵⁸ Ibid. loc. 477

through the woods together, making so much noise that there's not a soul in sight."⁵⁹

- f. "...solitude is the most radical of the disciplines for life in the spirit. In penal institutions, solitary confinement is used to break the strongest of wills. It is capable of this because it excludes interactions with others upon which fallen human personality completely depends. The life alienated from God collapses when deprived of its support from the sin-laden world. But the life in tune with God is actually nurtured by time spent alone."⁶⁰
- g. "You don't... approach solitude with the expectation that you will come away with some deep spiritual insight. It's not about what you're going to do; it's about what you're not going to do. In solitude you rest."⁶¹
- h. "To remain healthy, our souls need solitude with no agenda, no distractions, no noise. If someone asks you what you did in your 'time apart,' the correct response should be, 'Nothing.' Doing nothing does wonders for the soul."⁶²
- i. "The fruit of solitude is increased sensitivity and compassion for others. There comes a new freedom to be with people. There is new attentiveness to their needs, new responsiveness to their hurts. Thomas Merton observes, 'It is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers. The more solitary I am the more affection I have for them...Solitude and silence teach me to love my brothers for what they are, not for what they say.'"⁶³

3. A Caution

- a. "Let him who cannot be alone beware of community.... Let him who is not in community beware of being alone.... Each by itself has profound pitfalls and perils. One who wants fellowship without solitude plunges into the void of words and feelings, and one who seeks solitude without fellowship perishes in the abyss of vanity, self-infatuation, and despair." *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Barton, R. loc. 384

⁶⁰ Willard, D. p. 101

⁶¹ Ortberg, J. p. 137

⁶² Ibid. p. 140

⁶³ Ibid. p. 108

⁶⁴ Foster, R. p. 96

- b. “We must seek out the recreating stillness of solitude if we want to be with others meaningfully. We must seek the fellowship and accountability of others if we want to be alone safely.”⁶⁵

C. The Practice

1. “One of the best ways to begin practicing solitude is to notice the times when silence occurs naturally in our day. Even those of us who are incredibly busy have moments when we are alone, when nothing is happening. Usually we ignore these moments or find ways to fill them. Instead, we can appreciate these times and savor them. We can use these times to turn inward and attend to our feelings.”⁶⁶
2. “What are some steps into solitude? The first thing we can do is to take advantage of the ‘little solitudes’ that fill our day. Consider the solitude of those early morning moments in bed before the family awakens. Think of the solitude of a morning cup of coffee before beginning the work of the day. There is the solitude of bumper-to-bumper traffic during the freeway rush hour. There can be little moments of rest and refreshment when we turn a corner and see a flower or a tree. Instead of vocal prayer before a meal consider inviting everyone to join into a few moments of gathered silence. Once while driving a carload of chattering children and adults, I exclaimed, ‘Let’s play a game and see if everyone can be absolutely quiet until we reach the airport’ (about five minutes away). It worked, blessedly so. Find new joy and meaning in the little walk from the subway to your apartment. Slip outside just before bed and taste the silent night.”⁶⁷
3. Personal retreat
4. Quiet Days

D. Into the Silent Land⁶⁸

1. “God does not know how to be absent. The fact that most of us experience throughout most of our lives a sense of absence or distance from God is the great illusion that we are caught up in; it is the human condition. The sense of separation from God is real, but the meeting of stillness reveals that this perceived separation does not have the last word. This illusion of

⁶⁵ Ibid. p. 96

⁶⁶ Wolpert, D. p. 32

⁶⁷ Foster, R. p. 105

⁶⁸ Laird, Martin. *Into the Silent Land*. Oxford University Press. 2006

separation is generated by the mind and is sustained by the riveting of our attention to the interior soap opera, the constant chatter of the cocktail party going on in our heads. For most of us this is what normal is, and we are good at coming up with ways of coping with this perceived separation.” (p. 16)

2. “When the mind is brought to stillness, and all our strategies of acquisition have dropped, a deeper truth presents itself: we are and have always been one with God and we are all one in God (Jn. 17: 21).” (p. 16)
3. “Union with God is not something that needs to be acquired but realized.” (p 10)
4. “The more we realize we are one with God the more we become ourselves, just as we are, just as we were created to be.” (p. 17)
5. “What is this silence? It is certainly more than the mere absence of physical sound. More important to realize, however, is that this ineffable reality that the word ‘silence’ points to is not something that we need to acquire, like a piece of software we can install in the computer of our spiritual lives. It is pointing to something that is already within us, grounding all mental processes.” (p 23-24)

“Prayer is the outgrowth of both silence and solitude. In silence we let go of our manipulative control. In solitude we face up to what we are in the depths of our being. Prayer then becomes the offering of who we are to God: the giving of that broken, unclean, grasping, manipulative self to God for the word of God’s grace in our lives.”⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Mulholland, R. p. 140