

Spiritual Disciplines: Silence, Solitude, and Fasting

February 24, 2013

We have been looking at the active disciplines of spiritual life, study of the Word, meditation, prayer and worship. Then we began a look at disciplines of restraint, waiting for God, and today we'll look at silence, solitude, and fasting. But before we continue, let me ask you how you are doing on those we have gone over so far? Have you taken the first steps? The preaching of **Jesus' example does us no good unless we put what we learn into action.**

I was so encouraged to have someone come to my office this week and ask about a practical application of waiting for God. It all begins with setting your priorities in order. That requires a change in our routine. And then little by little we step out and learn by doing. Please do come and discuss any problems you are experiencing in implementing these disciplines in your own life.

The world we live in has changed dramatically in the last hundred years. Innovations have filled our world with noise, noise of machines, transportation, and entertainment. As I sit writing I can hear the hum of my computer fan. A moment ago the refrigerator compressor was humming. I hear the steam from an iron as my wife irons some clothing. A truck can be heard as it winds its way down the road. All these noises drown out the gentle steady sound of the nearby creek.

I live in a relatively quiet rural setting. Some guests from the city have a hard time sleeping in my home at night because it is so quiet. And yet there are constantly sounds of innovation all around. Distractions abound! Schedules press us. But the busier your world and the more demands are placed upon you, the greater your need for solitude and silence to center you on what is eternal. It is in solitude that we put the activities of life in their proper perspective.

Transforming turning points come through times of solitude and silence. Such men as Jonathan Edwards, Hudson Taylor, Adoniram Judson, Francis Schaefer, Jim Elliot³, and Billy Graham testify to that fact. But even more importantly, we see times of solitude and silence were turning points in the ministry of the Apostle Paul (**Galatians 1:17-18**) and Jesus. When do we get still before the Lord and take those times of solitude and silence? Where can we find it? Why do we need it?

First, let me address our need for solitude and silence. The Scriptures tell us we need these times. ¹⁰ *"Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!"* Psalm 46:10 (ESV) If we are to truly know that God is God, and is and forever will be exalted in the earth, we must be still. The clamor of the world

Commented [notes1]: 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."

Whitney, Donald S. (2012-01-05). *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (p. 196). Navpress. Kindle Edition.

Commented [notes2]: Galatians 1:17-18 (ESV)

¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.

¹⁸ Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days.

and all its worries and cares seems to scream that everything is out of control. Only when we step out of the clamor and still our heart and mind and look with our "God spectacles" of faith can we see that what man means for evil, God means for good, for the saving of many lives. (Genesis 50:20) Do you think God will no longer be exalted in this nation? Be still and let Him speak to your heart. Even in the silence, observe Him at work. He will be exalted among the nations! (Psalm 46:10)

15 For thus said the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel, "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength." Isaiah 30:15a (ESV) Quietness and trust shall be your strength! Oh that we might come to experience this truth in the tumultuous world in which we live. Have you ever noticed a group of people, even believers, feeding one another with the fears of what is happening in our culture, and there is someone in the group quietly listening who does not seem to join in their agitated state? He or she has this sense of peace and joy. And then when they do speak it is to point us to trust in God's sovereignty over all. (Romans 11:36)

Where did they find that strength? It was discovered in quietness and trust. In their times of solitude with God they were able to see that all is in His omnipotent hands. (Psalm 131:2) They know nothing escapes those hands. They have been shown that their days are orchestrated by the LORD. How did they see this? They got alone with God and in the silence let Him point out to them the working of His invisible hand.

20 But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him." Habakkuk 2:20 (ESV) The manifest presence of God puts us in a hushed silence. There is nothing that can be said. Nothing would be sufficient to express the glory we see there in His holy temple. The silence of awe and wonder is the best praise we can give, the only fitting response. He is too majestic for words. If we said anything, we would sound like Peter on the Mount and most likely receive a similar rebuke, "This is My beloved Son, with Whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him!" (Matthew 17:15) Be silent and listen.

7 Be silent before the Lord GOD! For the day of the LORD is near; Zephaniah 1:7a (ESV) God is coming to judge the earth. For every idle word we speak, we will give an account before God. (Matthew 12:36) What a great reason to be silent! It is a time to examine our heart and let the spotlight of the Holy Spirit show us our sin. (James 1:23-25)

The discipline of silence is not only in our times of being still before the LORD in our place of solitude, but also in our conversations with others. Have you ever noticed how we seem to abhor silence in a conversation? It's as if we need to impress others with our opinions. Are we so insecure? The wise person waits and prays and speaks fitting words and at the right time. (Ecclesiastes 5:2; Proverbs 29:11) He does not need to

Commented [notes3]: Genesis 50:20 (ESV)

²⁰ As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.

Commented [notes4]: Psalm 46:10 (ESV)

¹⁰ "Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!"

Commented [notes5]: Romans 11:36 (ESV)

³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

Commented [notes6]: Psalm 131:2 (ESV)

² But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me.

Commented [notes7]: Matthew 17:5 (ESV)

⁵ He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."

Commented [notes8]: Matthew 12:36 (ESV)

³⁶ I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak,

Commented [notes9]: James 1:23-25 (ESV)

²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror.

²⁴ For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.

²⁵ But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

Commented [notes10]: Ecclesiastes 5:2 (ESV)

² Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few.

Commented [notes11]: Proverbs 29:11 (ESV)

¹¹ A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back.

impress others for Jesus is interceding for him before the Father. (Romans 8:34) Why would he need the approval of men? Jesus spoke only what He heard from the Father. (John 8:38) The discipline of silence when in a group may be even more challenging than silence in our times of solitude. (John 19:9)

As in all the spiritual disciplines, our chief reason for practicing them is that our perfect example, Jesus, practiced them. If He kept in sync with the Father through these means, surely we have need of following His example. ¹ *And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness ² for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days. And when they were ended, he was hungry.* Luke 4:1-2 (ESV) Jesus began His ministry with 40 days of solitude and fasting. Notice the Spirit led Him into this time.

Alone with God we face the temptations and make the decisions that affect our entire life. It is in these times of solitude that we deal with the central issues of our heart. God allows the enemy of our soul to test us so that we can decide early on what we will choose and why. This rarely happens in the busyness of life, but rather in these times when stand alone with God and our temptations.

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 14:23 (ESV) We need times of solitude after a tiring time of ministry. Ministry can be pastoral or business or labor for the glory of God. When we have poured out, we need to be filled back up. The TV won't do it, nor will any other form of entertainment. Man can't do it. Refreshment happens when we get alone with God and drink from the fountain of living water. (Isaiah 55:1) If we try to go on in our own strength, we will find that we will run out of the will to go on. This is when the enemy attacks. But if we will take a time of refreshing in the quiet before God, we will find our strength renewed. He is our strength.

It is also our time of giving Him the glory and thanks recognizing that any good thing that was accomplished He did through us. This keeps our egos in check and reminds us that He is the source. (Lamentations 3:27-28)

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.* Mark 1:35 (ESV) Times of solitude are not just for beginning of ministry or for refreshing after a difficult ordeal, they should be our daily habit. Jesus needed solitude with His Father in prayer to empower and direct His days. He found it in the quiet of the early morning hours. Some find it in the middle of the night, breaking their sleep into two portions. Some find it in the evening hours before they retire for the night. Whenever and wherever it works for you, find it, use it, make it a habit, and keep it alive. You will come to treasure it if you will just try it for a

Commented [notes12]: Romans 8:34 (ESV)

³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

Commented [notes13]: John 8:38 (ESV)

³⁸ I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father."

Commented [notes14]: John 19:9 (ESV)

⁹ He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer.

Commented [notes15]: Isaiah 55:1 (ESV)

¹ "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

Commented [notes16]: Lamentations 3:27-28 (ESV)

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;

while. Remember that I added the second S to ACTS, adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication, and silently listen to the Spirit.

⁴² *And when it was day, he departed and went into a desolate place. And the people sought him and came to him, and would have kept him from leaving them,* Luke 4:42 (ESV) Jesus could have let the pressure of the immediate demands direct His day. That is usually what we do. It has been called "the tyranny of the urgent". But He had been alone with the Father in prayer and knew He had a different direction. He was to move on from there to other towns. It is in the solitude and silence that we find God's priorities that are often different from what is pressing around us.

Solitude and silence are means by which we shift our focus from the present times to that of eternity. When the Apostle Paul commands us to fix our minds and hearts on things above, we wonder if it is even possible. (Colossians 3:1-2) Solitude and silence in our closet, desert, or forest meadow open the door to the inner world of the spirit where we shut out the pressing demands of life and put the kingdom of God and its King front and center.

Most of us will find it is difficult to get alone and be silent for any amount of time. "Solitude is a terrible trial, for it serves to crack open and burst apart the shell of our superficial securities."¹ It is just God and us, and many times we find the relationship sorely lacking. We hurry away from such times lest we be challenged to face our compromises. But the soul that longs to walk in the light of His face (Psalm 89:15) will long to linger there as Joshua did before the tent of meeting. (Exodus 33:11) "Only silence will allow us life-transforming concentration upon God. It allows us to hear the gentle God whose only Son 'shall not strive, nor cry; neither shall any man hear his voice above the street noise' (Matthew 12:19). It is this God who tells us that 'in quietness and trust is your strength' (Isaiah 30:15, NAS)."²

The greatest reason to get alone before the LORD is that Jesus invites us there. ³¹ *And he said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while."* Mark 6:31a (ESV) If you are Jesus' disciple, this is the place you learn of Him. When my alarm goes off before the first light of dawn and I often want to roll over and go back to sleep, I motivate myself with this thought, "Jesus is waiting for me at our usual meeting place. I don't want to keep Him waiting!"

Another discipline that compliments solitude is fasting. Jesus never commanded us to fast. He did model it. We see the beginning of His ministry in a 40 day fast combined with solitude. He did say, "When you fast...", not "If you fast..." (Matthew 6:16) And when He was ministering to the woman at the well, He told His disciples that doing the will of His Father was His food. (John 4:34) In other words, being in the center of God's will, in service to Him by the power of the Spirit, was more satisfying than food. This

Commented [notes17]: Colossians 3:1-2 (ESV)

¹ If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.
² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.

Commented [notes18]: Willard, Dallas (2009-02-06). The Spirit of the Disciplines (Kindle Locations 3184-3185). HarperOne. Kindle Edition. Louis Bouyer, The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers, vol. 1 of A History of Christian Spirituality (New York: Seabury, 1982), 313.

Commented [notes19]: Psalm 89:15 (ESV)
¹⁵ Blessed are the people who know the festal shout, who walk, O LORD, in the light of your face,

Commented [notes20]: Exodus 33:11 (ESV)
¹¹ Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses turned again into the camp, his assistant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent.

Commented [notes21]: Matthew 12:19 (ESV)
¹⁹ He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets;

Commented [notes22]: Willard, Dallas (2009-02-06). The Spirit of the Disciplines (Kindle Locations 3238-3241). HarperOne. Kindle Edition.

Commented [notes23]: Matthew 6:16 (ESV)
¹⁶ "And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

Commented [notes24]: John 4:34 (ESV)
³⁴ Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.

was what Job was saying when he declared, ¹² *I have not departed from the commandment of his lips; I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my portion of food.* Job 23:12 (ESV)

The first thing you will notice when you decide to fast from food is how much of our pleasure revolves around the thought and consumption of food. Until you fast from food, you will never realize how much of our thoughts and time revolve around our three meals a day. You will learn how powerful and clever your body is in getting its way in spite of your earnest determination. But how freeing it is when you master the demand of your appetites by putting God first. (Psalm 16:5)

Fasting is not necessarily only about refraining from food, though that is the chief form of fasting. Some practice the same idea by giving up some daily pleasure, especially during this season of Lent leading up to Good Friday. They may give up TV, or deserts, or eating out, anything to keep their appetites in check and that will serve as a constant reminder that they are to be focusing on the Lord. This is a good place to start with a fast. Then progress to a one day fast from food, and more as the LORD leads.

Fasting reminds us that **it is not food but rather the Word of God that is really what sustains our life.** (Matthew 4:4) We are feasting upon the Lord, and that is nothing less than sheer delight! No wonder Jesus said we should not appear to be sad when we fast. (Matthew 6:16) When we fast, we are practicing self-denial, putting God first and our flesh in check which is required of all who would be Jesus' disciples. (Matthew 16:24) (For more information on longer fasts, <http://www.cru.org/training-and-growth/devotional-life/personal-guide-to-fasting/index.htm>.)

Let me close by reminding you that solitude, silence, and fasting are not a means by which we earn God's favor. Our practice of these disciplines should be between us and God and never to impress others. To insure your motives are godly, make every effort to keep it to yourself. These disciplines of abstinence are practiced to draw near to God, to put Him first in our life, and to endeavor to learn and walk in God's will. They are not easy, but they are a joy. The more you practice them, the easier they are to practice. You will find they are essential to your growth in Christlikeness. They lead us into deep abiding joy that comes from our relationship with our Creator.

Questions

- 1 What great men were changed by solitude?
- 2 What Scriptures advise silence?
- 3 Why be silent in conversations?
- 4 How did Jesus model solitude?
- 5 How does solitude shift our focus?
- 6 Why is solitude difficult?
- 7 What is the best reason for solitude?

Commented [notes25]: Psalm 16:5 (ESV)

⁵ The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot.

Commented [notes26]: Matthew 4:4 (ESV)

⁴ But he answered, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Commented [notes27]: Matthew 6:16 (ESV)

¹⁶ "And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

Commented [notes28]: Matthew 16:24 (ESV)

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

- 8 How does fasting compliment solitude?
- 9 What does Jesus say about fasting?
- 10 How can you start these disciplines?