

Scripture: Matthew 6:1-8 NIV

Subject: Our pursuit of holiness is enhanced and a life of righteousness is possible when we meet and talk with God in private.

Introduction

Gordon MacDonald, in *Ordering Your Private World* had this to say about the necessity of silence and solitude for the Christian:¹

Few of us can fully appreciate the terrible conspiracy of noise there is about us, noise that denies us the silence and solitude we need for this cultivation of the inner garden. It would not be hard to believe that the archenemy of God has conspired to surround us at every conceivable point in our lives with the interfering noises of civilization that, when left unmuffled, usually drown out the voice of God....

In this day of beepers, pagers, cell phones, PDAs, portable computers, mp3 players, television and satellite radio, *how is it even possible for God to compete for our attention, unless we plan to give it to Him?! Two-thousand years ago, in an age of "no-tech" and only ambient noise, Jesus still found it necessary to regularly withdraw to isolated places to devote his full attention to communicating with God. Why do we feel that is not necessary for us? As the author of another age writes:*

Jesus Christ could not have poured out his heart to his Father as he did, and gained the refreshment and strength he gained in prayer, if he had remained in the midst of the curious and exacting throngs who waited upon him. He withdrew himself into the wilderness. We have intimation that he had to make a very strenuous effort to escape from the multitudes and to secure the seclusion he desired. *But he made it.* And we shall be wise if we do the same. If we only draw near to God and have fellowship with him when we happen to be left alone, and when occasions offer themselves to us, we shall be very lacking in our devotion; the flame of our piety will languish on the altar of our heart. We must *make* occasion; we must *seize* opportunity; we must compel our life to yield the still hour, when, withdrawing ourselves into solitude, we are alone with God.²

What is Solitude?

Just as fasting is the abstinence from food for spiritual purposes, solitude is the withdrawing to privacy for spiritual purposes. The period of solitude may last only a few minutes, or for days. Solitude may be sought in order to participate without interruption in other Spiritual Disciplines, or just to be alone with God.

While solitude and silence are not synonymous, the fact is the two disciplines do go together. Indeed, we do well to notice that Jesus often withdrew to solitary places where the din of his hectic life were quieted, and there he spent time to often pray and meditate, two other disciplines that benefit from time alone... with God!

The Necessity of Solitude

My friend Kevin and I have gone three times to an "outpost" camp North of Red Lake, ON. There is six small lakes all in one area, and only one cabin, and you can only get there by plane.

1 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985), page 126.

2 The Pulpit Commentary: St. Luke Vol., ed. H. D. M. Spence-Jones, p. 127 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2004).

Both Kevin and I were raised up North, and we find that the solitude and majesty rejuvenates our souls. Going there is such a blessing to me, but not everyone feels like that!

Many people are *afraid* of solitude and silence. That's why we have our music on all the time, TV's blaring in empty rooms, lights on: anything to keep us distracted, anything to avoid being ourselves *with* ourselves, and with God. Richard Foster writes:

“Our fear of being alone drives us to noise and crowds. We keep up a constant stream of words even if they are inane. We buy radios that strap to our wrist or fit over our ears so that if no one else is around at least we are not condemned to silence. T. S. Eliot analyzed our culture so well when he wrote, “Where shall the world be found, where will the word resound? Not here, there is not enough silence.”

But loneliness or clatter are not our only alternatives. We can cultivate an inner solitude and silence that sets us free from loneliness and fear. Loneliness is inner emptiness. Solitude is inner fulfilment. Solitude is not first a place but a state of mind and heart.” - P. 84

The Christian disciple must **learn the necessity of solitude**. Spiritual disciplines are for the purpose of disciplining our desires and feelings, and turning them away from our physical appetites and *setting them toward God*. Solitude means **getting alone for awhile so that we can begin to know ourselves and know God in a deeper way**. We need both **solitude and silence** because the world is bombarding us with all kinds of messages — many of which are not only wrong, but detrimental to our spiritual well-being. We **need** solitude and silence so that we can tune-out the world and hear what God is trying to say to us. Take Elijah's example:

¹¹The LORD [to Elijah], “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. ¹²After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. ¹³When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” **1 Kings 19:11-13 NIV**

Solitude in Scripture

We only have to look at Jesus' life if we want to find the practice of Solitude in scripture. Jesus inaugurated His ministry by spending forty days alone in the wilderness (Mt. 4:1-11). Before He chose the twelve He spent the entire night alone in the desert hills (Lk. 6:12). When He received the news of the death of John the Baptist, He “*withdrew from there in a boat to a lonely place apart*” (Mt. 14:13). After the miraculous feeding of the five thousand Jesus made His disciples leave; then He dismissed the crowd and “*went up into the hills by himself....*” (Mt. 14:23). Following a long night of work “*in the morning, a great while before day, he rose and went out to a lonely place....*” (Mk. 1:35). Luke matter-of-factly records that “*Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed*” (Lk 5:16).

Someone has written:

... If Jesus was in such need of solitude and prayer, why would we ever think that we do not need it? If the Son of God needed a time and place for prayer, how much more do we need it? Let's look again at the times Jesus went to be in solitude. He went to be alone **before a major life change**. He went

alone to listen to God **before important decisions**. He went to be alone to **grieve** over the loss of a loved one. He went to be alone after **a great victory** and successful ministry. He was alone before a **great spiritual event** took place in his life. And finally, he was alone as he entered the most difficult period of his life — when **trouble, suffering and death** were facing him.

These are the same kind of situations where we need solitude and silence. Are you facing a major decision or life change? Is there an event coming up for which you need to be prepared? Are you grieving or in some sorrow? Have you just expended a great deal of energy on something with which you were successful? You need to get away and recharge your batteries. You need a quiet place where you can listen to God. You need to prepare for the days which are coming. -- *Finding God in the Silence* by Rodney Buchanan

The Benefits Of Solitude

Building Intimacy and Character

Some one once said, “True character is who you are when you are alone.” Dallas Willard says that the Discipline of Solitude is for strengthening. So if we are to allow God to strengthen us, to build into our true character, then we need to get alone with him more often so that we, like Elijah, can hear what he would say to us. Have you ever noticed that the more intimate and comfortable you are with someone, that the fewer words are required? The people that are closest to me, I don’t have to impress with words or distract with noise. *I am free to be myself, and they are free to be themselves*. In solitude, we can be alone with God so that we can develop intimacy with Him, and so that He may develop our inner character.

Being Prepared

It is in times of solitude that I assess our lives, and be reminded of our calling and purpose in life. We often see Jesus preparing for the major events or crises in His life by withdrawing.

Donald Whitney tells of how Billy Graham was being pressured by Charles Templeton to give up his belief in the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures. Templeton had many convincing arguments that Graham had trouble refuting, and it was a tumultuous time for him. Graham took some time in solitude and meditated on the many times in scripture that it said “the Word of the Lord came.” He saw how Jesus treated scripture, and he realized that intellect alone would not solve his problem – that it was an issue of faith. So he placed his Bible on a stump and knelt down and said, Oh God; I cannot prove certain things. I cannot answer some of the questions Church is raising and some of the other people are raising, but I accept this Book by faith as the Word of God.” And through that time of solitude and the perspective he gained that night, Billy Graham was shaped into the man the world has known since.

Communicating With God

It is hard to pray when we’re ‘on the run.’ Mark says that “*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.*” (Mk 1:35). Solitude isn’t about aloneness for its own sake, but as Jesus modelled, for the purpose of communicating with our Heavenly Father happen in a more effective fashion. This is an important point: communicating with God isn’t communication unless it’s “two-way” as Gary pointed out to us last week. If we are surrounded by our normal everyday life, with all its noise and distraction, what are the chances that we will hear what God says to us? If we are in a rush,

regurgitating our 'want' list to God as fast as possible, what are the chances that God will even be able to get a 'word in edge-wise'? If you have ever had a deep, meaningful conversation with someone, you know how important it is to be patient, and quiet, waiting to hear what the other person has to say, and not filling all the silence with our prattling.

If we are serious about allowing God to conform us to the image of our Saviour, then we need to be serious about the need for silence and solitude. This is one way we show that our priorities are in the right place, that we are seeking first 'the Kingdom of God'.

"Seek first the kingdom of God." This requires taking time out from family, friends, career, ministry, even "doing good" to enter into the great silence of God. Alone in that silence, the noise within will subside and the Voice of Love will be heard. Without such silence we will drown in the inner cacophony of dialogues, encounters, meetings, discussion, and conferences where there is much speaking and little listening.³

How to practice Solitude

Daily Solitude: Traditionally, Christians have called this practice "having a quiet time." It is not *taking time* but rather *making time* to be alone and quieting yourself before God. Start with 10 minutes, and work up. Martin Luther felt that he needed 5 hours a day in solitude with God just so he could accomplish all that he had to do! What are some tips?

- 1. Find a quiet time and place to meet with God.** This is not a whenever-it-will-fit-into-my-schedule time. It needs to be a non-distracting place and a time when you can let your mind slow down.
- 2. Select a passage of Scripture to meditate on.** A chapter or even a single verse will do. Begin reading it piece by piece, word by word. Slowly taste and digest it as you read. Refrain from "studying" the passage, just let it soak in. The purpose of reading is to allow your thoughts to slow down and let God do the talking.
- 3. Focus on listening. Forget technique and steps.** Forget yourself and whether you are doing things right or not. Stop your self-talk and listen. This is a time God wants to speak *to* you, not *through* you, for the sake of others.
- 4. Ask God to come closer to you.** Ask Him to teach you how to slow your thinking down so you can hear His voice better.
- 5. Be careful not to try to imagine what God is like, what the experience will be like, or what He will do.** There is no way God will ever fit into your concept or expectations.
- 6. Never become discouraged.** Your mind will tend to wander. When it does, slowly and gently bring it back to the passage and to listening. Some days may be easier than others.
- 7. When you're finished, allow time to "settle in" and get refocused on what you need to do next.** It's helpful to have a somewhat open-ended time frame. If you have a time constraint you will be more easily distracted by the clock.

The steps themselves are not important. Change them to work for you. The important thing is to become quiet so you can hear God's still, small voice. Remember, it is something that you learn, and it will take longer than you want it to. Intimacy, like oak trees, grows slowly.⁴

Retreats: Taking a retreat may be what comes first to your mind when you think of the discipline of solitude. There are places where you can go to be alone with God. You might have a special place where you have really connected with God. Perhaps you know someone who

3 Manning, Brendan. "Grabbing Aholt of God." Westervelt, P. (1994; 2006). Discipleship Journal, Issue 80 (March/April 1994). NavPress.

4 Paul Westervelt, P. (1995; 2006). Discipleship Journal, Issue 89 (September/October 1995). NavPress.

owns a cottage or vacation property that you can use. Go for a day, or even half a day, once you've done that, you can think of practicing solitude for longer periods. Make use of retreat centres. Every disciple can benefit from solitary retreats, one-day or longer. But we often feel that we're too busy, too indispensable, too involved. Make the time!!

Conclusion

Who here remembers the days of the ice-man, ice-boxes and icehouses? These storage houses had very thick walls for insulation and the ice blocks would be stacked in there and covered with sawdust to keep them from melting too quickly.

Well one day, a worker in one of these icehouses lost a very special watch, given him by his father who had died some years earlier. When he gave it to him, he told his son that whenever he heard it ticking to remember how much he loved him. So he was very upset at himself for losing this watch. He and his co-workers searched long and hard for this precious timepiece--- but with no luck. They were ready to give up, when a young lad who was hanging around asked if he could help in the search. The men told him that they had already looked everywhere, but undaunted, the boy walked into the icehouse and closed the big thick door behind him. Five minutes later, the door opened again and out walked the boy with the watch in his hand!

The men were delighted and amazed, and when the boy gave the watch back to it's relieved owner, he asked the boy how in the world he found it so fast. The boy smiled and said; "I just went in there by myself, closed the door, laid on the floor and got very still.....and then I listened real hard."

--"Is that You God?" by Dwight Davis

The Bible says, "[Be still, and know that I am God](#)" (Psalm 46:10). Isaiah boldly proclaimed "[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'](#)" (Isaiah 30:15). Of our Lord, Luke observed that "[... Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed](#)" (Luke 5:16). If Jesus needed to withdraw to lonely and solitary places in order to have communion with God, does it not stand to reason that *it is that much more necessary for us?*

We are a peculiar people who somehow feel that the final measure of a person's spirituality is to be gauged by their capacity to go, go, go ... for God. On the contrary, our Father calls us to come apart and spend some time in solitude with him.—**W. Phillip Keller**

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