

Spiritual Discipline: Silence/Solitude

September 2016

The fear of being alone petrifies many people and can drive some to noise and crowds. We keep up a constant stream of words, we turn up the music, or we let the unwatched TV play, just to avoid listening - trying to distract ourselves from the reality that we are alone. But loneliness and clatter are not our only alternatives. Loneliness has been described as inner emptiness. However, solitude is inner fulfillment. Solitude is more a state of mind and heart than it is a place. There is a solitude of the heart than can be maintained at all times. Crowds, or the lack of them, have little to do with this inward attentiveness. If we possess inward solitude, we do not fear being alone, for we know that we are never fully alone. Solitude and silence are disciplines of abstinence which help disciples of Jesus learn to engage more deeply with the Lord and become more like him in daily life. Solitude and silence make space for God to do a deep work inside us and in our relationships with others. It's a training that may be difficult, especially at first.

The normal way to practice solitude and silence is get alone with God in a quiet place for some hours or days. Perhaps you take a walk on a nature trail or sit beside a lake or a creek. Or a quiet spot in a park or your backyard may work well. Even a secluded chair inside your house may work — as long as all your communication and media devices are turned off! The point of your time in solitude and silence is to do nothing and don't try to make anything happen. In solitude and silence you're learning to stop doing, stop producing, stop pleasing people, stop entertaining yourself, stop obsessing — stop doing anything except to simply be your naked self before God and be found by him.

Jesus set an example of this discipline as He listened to the Father and received discernment for many things. He began his public ministry by spending forty days alone in the wilderness fasting and praying in solitude and silence (Matthew 4:1-11). Before He chose His twelve disciples He spent the night alone in the desert hills (Luke 6:12). Jesus also taught His disciples to follow this practice (Mark 6:31-32). Interspersed throughout Jesus' ministry of preaching, healing, and discipling we see Him withdraw from the crowds again and again — often getting up very early to do so — in order to be quiet and alone with the Father. This "Rhythm of Life" is the secret to how Jesus was renewed in His Father's love and empowered by the Spirit for His life and ministry.

Silence and Solitude help us grow in spiritual understanding in at least the following four ways:

- **We Learn to Enter God's Peace.** Experiencing solitude brings the wonderful refreshment of God's peace (Philippians 4:7). Even in stressful circumstances we can learn to maintain a silent center, a stillness of soul that flows in God's peace.
- **We Learn to See and Hear.** "The purpose of silence and solitude is to be able to see and hear" (Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, p. 86). The Spirit speaks to us when our heart is still and silent before the Lord — not when we're rushing about and doing our own thing in our own way. So it's a good idea to bring your journal and write down what you see and hear.
- **It Prevents Burnout.** Serving the Lord without Sabbath time, tends to make us spiritually dry and can lead to burn out. Spending extended time with Jesus in solitude and silence helps us grow more in love with Him! Not making regular use of solitude and silence is a factor in why people give up on serving God and step away from ministry positions early.
- **We Learn to Practice God's Presence.** Solitude and silence with God is about seeking to maintain our focus on God continually, being conscious of and interacting with God's presence every moment as we go about the activities of our day.

Don't misunderstand the exercise of silence. Ecclesiastes 3:7 says, "There is a time to be silent and a time to speak". We must know when to be quiet and when to be in community. Jesus knew when to be silent before his accusers and when to speak up; when to let people go their way and when to confront them. Holding our tongue is important to be able to "speak the truth in love" to people (Ephesians 4:15). In solitude and silence with Jesus, we learn to bring His wisdom and grace into our relationships with others.

Throughout the month of September, live out the spiritual disciplines of Silence and Solitude by working through the items below and discussing them with your 222 Group.

- Spend time each day this month in silence. Take advantage of the "little solitudes" that fill our day (i.e., early morning moments before the family awakens; a morning cup of coffee before beginning the work of the day; or the bumper-to-bumper traffic during the freeway rush hour). Keep a record of what you see and hear from God.
- Be aware of how practicing the discipline of silence and solitude helps you face stressful situations you encounter. Share with your 222 Group some of these experiences.
- Go to ministrygrid.com. After logging in, type the following code in the "Have a Membership Code?" field: **76EC25** and view the two videos on Silence by Kerry Shook. First time users of Ministry Grid will be asked to create a free profile. View and discuss new insights with your 222 Group.