

Topic 22: Solitude & Silence

Learning to Quiet Your Soul

“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



Two things are true:

- ▶ We are the most *connected* generation ever.
- ▶ Ours is the *loudest* culture in human history.

Think about it . . . we have smart phones that can do about everything but serve us



a cappuccino! With wireless technology, we can stream music and movies (and pretty much anything else) from the Internet—twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week—from just about anywhere on the planet. Would you like to sit in a bustling coffee shop and listen to your favorite band while you FaceTime with a friend on the opposite coast, text back and forth with your mom, *and* keep an eye on your Twitter feed? No problem.

But at what cost? What’s all this doing to our souls? Are we addicted to noise? And is our constant connection to culture hurting our connection with God?

Here’s a third true thing: As we follow Jesus to know him and his teachings and as we grow to become more like him in character, we must also do the things Jesus did. We must engage in holy habits, or spiritual disciplines. These are integral to God’s mission of transformation—our own lives and the lives of others. Two of these holy habits are *solitude* and *silence*.



Bible Study

What the Bible Tells Us About Solitude

For Jesus, time in solitude was a top priority. Consider these passages, one from each of the four gospels:

- ▶ “After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone” (Matthew 14:23).
- ▶ “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” (Mark 1:35).
- ▶ “Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, ‘Who do the crowds say I am?’” (Luke 9:18).
- ▶ “Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself” (John 6:15).

“We are so afraid of silence that we chase ourselves from one event to the next in order not to have to spend a moment alone with ourselves, in order not to have to look at ourselves in the mirror.”
—Dietrich Bonhoeffer

1. What conclusions do you draw from those verses?

Solitude is a retreat—whether brief or long—from people and the distractions of modern life. It’s the deliberate choice to withdraw from social interaction and daily “to do” lists so that you can enter an environment in which you can focus your undivided attention on the Father in heaven. When the Bible emphasizes solitude, it doesn’t just mean “being alone.” It means “being alone *with God*.” This is important for at least three reasons:

Solitude Is Preparatory

Time alone with God can strengthen us for upcoming ministry or life challenges. Jesus spent almost six weeks alone in the wilderness before commencing his public ministry (Matthew 4:2).

Simple Ways to Find Solitude

Whether you need a few minutes of time alone with God or a more extended period, here are some tips:

- Set your alarm to go off thirty minutes before the others in your household wake up.
- Stay awake for thirty minutes after everyone else has gone to bed.
- If it's safe to do so, take a walk around your neighborhood after dark.
- Find a nearby park and "claim" an unused park bench.
- Utilize the guest room.
- At work, take advantage of an empty conference room during lunch.
- Park your car by a nearby lake.
- Find a study carrel in the library.
- Go sit in your deer stand, duck blind, or fishing camp.
- Borrow a friend's house who is on vacation.
- Go in your bedroom and lock the door.
- Sit and soak in the bathtub.
- Sit on the back porch in a rocking chair.
- Slip into a church or chapel during the week.

It's because of Jesus' example that many believers get up a few minutes early each day and have a devotional time, quiet time, or appointment with God. They see this as an important spiritual exercise—an opportunity to get their bearings, remember what's true, and reconnect with the lover of their souls before launching out into a crowded and loud world.

Discussion Questions

- ▶ What are your own devotional life habits? Do you have any?
- ▶ Have you ever experimented with extended times of silence or even a silent retreat? What was that like?

Solitude Is Revealing

When we are socially engaged, mixing and mingling with people, or handling all of the tasks at work or home, it's easy to become obsessed with what others think. Our minds fill with questions:

- ▶ *How am I coming across?*
- ▶ *Do they notice me?*
- ▶ *Do they like me?*
- ▶ *Do they consider me charming? Funny? Intelligent? Competent?*
- ▶ *Am I doing everything on my to-do list?*
- ▶ *Does God see me as a failure?*

Surrounded by people and jockeying for attention and acclaim, our motives and mission can morph. Instead of being our authentic selves, we become image-conscious. We are "on." We play to the crowd. We wear masks.

In solitude all that is stripped away. There's no one around to impress, no one around to fear. It's just us and the one who knows us through and through, the one who loves us fully and completely.

Solitude clarifies exactly what we've been looking to for our identities. Like Jesus in the wilderness, solitude forces us to deal with the temptation to find significance in





unhealthy ways. But in addition, it helps us see that God loves us unconditionally. No matter how we've failed, he loves us and is on our side, helping us to stand up again and keep going.

Discussion Questions

- ▶ Is the thought of solitude *exciting* to you, *excruciating*, or something in between? Why?
- ▶ In recent years, researchers and writers have shed light on different personality types—For example, being an introvert versus being an extrovert. Which are you? Could that be one clue as to why you either enjoy or hate solitude?

Solitude Is Restorative

“Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone; only God is here.”—John Wesley

When we're tired or confused, when we have forgotten who and whose we really are, solitude can help us regain our bearings. By withdrawing, we can tune out all the other voices and hear the one voice that matters most.

In 1 Kings 19:1–4, 9–13 (NLT) we read a great example of the restorative power of solitude in the life of the prophet Elijah. After a stressful time of ministry in which he had faced down hundreds of false prophets, these events happened:

When [King] Ahab got home, he told Jezebel [his wife, the queen] everything Elijah had done, including the way he

had killed all the prophets of Baal. So Jezebel sent this message to Elijah: “May the gods strike me and even kill me if by this time tomorrow I have not killed you just as you killed them.”

Elijah was afraid and fled for his life. He went to Beersheba, a town in Judah, and he left his servant there. Then he went on alone into the wilderness, traveling all day. He sat down under a solitary broom tree and prayed that he might die.

But the Lord said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

Elijah replied, “I have zealously served the Lord God Almighty. But the people of Israel have broken their covenant with you, torn down your altars, and killed every one of your prophets. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me, too.”

“Go out and stand before me on the mountain,” the Lord told him. And as Elijah stood there, the Lord passed by, and a mighty windstorm hit the mountain. It was such a terrible blast that the rocks were torn loose, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake there was a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire there was the sound of a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

And a voice said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”



Discussion Questions

- ▶ The sound Elijah heard in verse 12, “a gentle whisper,” is also translated as “a low whisper” (ESV), and “a gentle blowing” (NASB). What exactly do you think he heard in this solitary place?
- ▶ When you’ve spent time alone in the presence of God, how have you sensed him speaking to you?
- ▶ If you’ve never sensed God speaking to you what are other ways God gets your attention in “a gentle whisper”?

What the Bible Tells Us About Silence

Silence is the absence of noise and commotion. To “practice the discipline of silence” is to consciously withdraw from the ruckus of television, music, conversation, podcasts, social media, minor “emergencies” at work or home, etc. The discipline of silence is making the deliberate choice to enter into the quiet. Once there, instead of filling time and space with words, we listen attentively. We do so because as Solomon wisely noted, there is a “time to be quiet and a time to speak” (Ecclesiastes 3:7, NLT).

2. Consider these passages from the psalms and the prophets that emphasize the important role being quiet plays in the spiritual life.

- ▶ “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)
- ▶ “But I have calmed and quieted myself, I am like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child I am content.” (Psalm 131:2)
- ▶ “But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.” (Habakkuk 2:20, ESV)
- ▶ “The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD. It is good for a man to bear the yoke while he is young. Let him sit alone in silence, for the LORD has laid it on him. Let him bury his face in the dust—there may yet be hope” (Lamentations 3:25–29).

Take five minutes to sit quietly with these verses. Slowly, carefully, simply read them several times. Let God’s Word wash over you. Listen attentively. When you are done, journal some thoughts on a separate piece of paper.

Discussion Questions

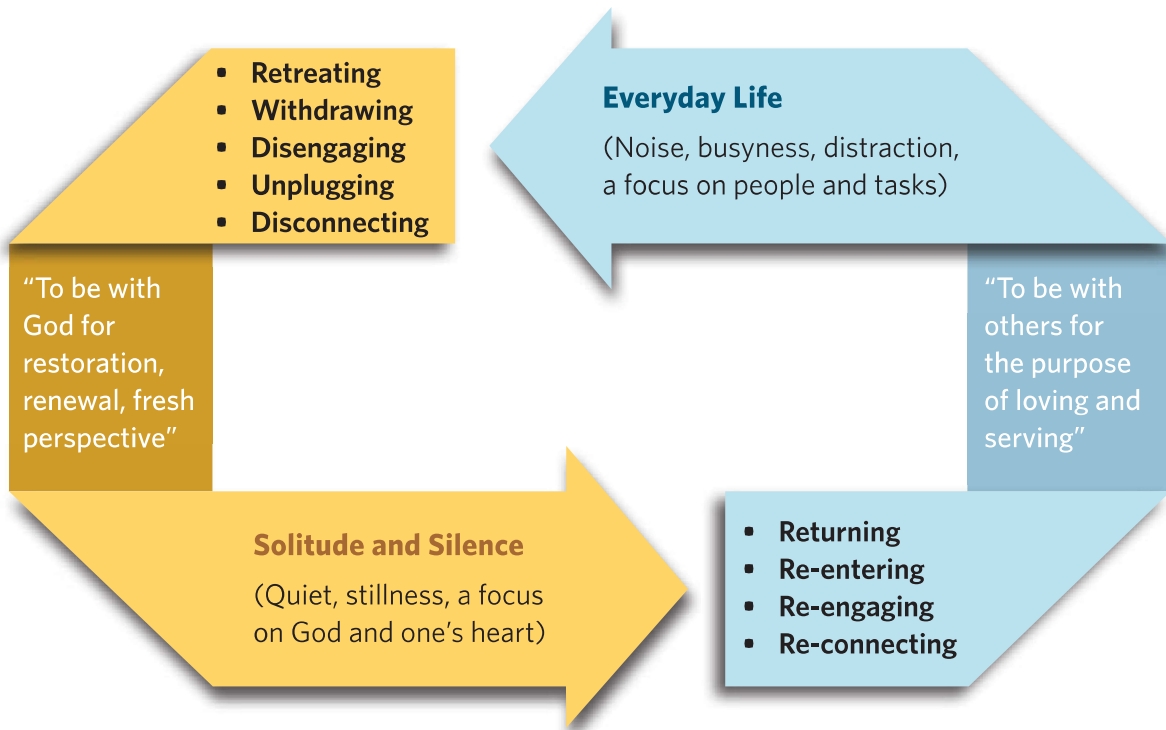
- ▶ How can noise, talking, and busyness actually be addictive?
- ▶ How can you stop instinctively turning on the television when you walk in the house, or turning on your radio when you get in your car?



- ▶ How difficult would it be for you to go a half-day without speaking, or without immersing yourself in music and noise?
- ▶ Do you think there might be occasions when it's appropriate to withdraw even from written words? Can a person?
- ▶ What does sitting in silence make you feel? Can you name it?

3. Multiple times in the gospels, Jesus uttered the odd catchphrase "Whoever has ears, let them hear" (Matthew 11:15). What do you think he meant? Why is listening such a big deal in spirituality?

Cultivating the Habits of Solitude and Silence





Take-Home Reflections

Here are some simple, everyday ways to build the rhythm of healthy disengagement and reengagement into our lives:

- ▶ Instead of staying glued to your smart phone all day, every day, put it away for short periods of time. See if you can go an hour without it, then try to go two, and then three.
- ▶ Set aside your “to do” list. Don’t judge your worth to God on the basis of how much you accomplish.
- ▶ Turn off your electronics. Protect your time with God from others’ demands.
- ▶ Resist the urge to immediately turn on the radio when you get in your car. Instead, use drive time to quietly meditate on a Bible verse.
- ▶ Sharpen your listening skills. Ask someone you’re close to questions and really focus on their responses.
- ▶ Spend an evening with no television, YouTube, Netflix, etc.
- ▶ Set your alarm clock fifteen minutes earlier. Use that time to quietly read and contemplate Scripture.
- ▶ Find a solitary place and pray as the young prophet Samuel did, “Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening” (1 Samuel 3:9).
- ▶ Practice slipping away and being alone. If thirty minutes makes you uncomfortable, start with ten.
- ▶ Especially if you live in the city, devote a Saturday morning or Sunday afternoon to walking in the woods or countryside, or sitting in a quiet park.
- ▶ Take a break from podcasts and online sermons. Instead, sit quietly with your Bible letting God’s Word and Spirit speak to your soul.
- ▶ Declare a 24-hour electronics fast—no gadgets, gizmos, Internet, or cable.

Carve out time with God, simply sitting together quietly and enjoying each other’s presence. No words are necessary.

Life Application

An important part of discipleship is learning how to apply God’s truths to your life. Below are just a few ways you can start thinking about what you’ve learned and apply it to your daily life.

1. Memorize this topic’s verse, Isaiah 30:15.
2. Read *The Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence. This quick read tells of a seventeenth-century French monk’s attempt to maintain a quiet awareness of God at all times.
3. Set aside fifteen minutes away from distractions. Pick a Bible verse about trust (Prov. 3:5-6), hope (Psalm 31:24), or resting in God (Psalm 62:5-6). Read it slowly to yourself, thinking about each phrase. Whenever other thoughts crowd in, repeat the verse in your mind.