

"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

SOLITUDE

DESIRE	to leave people behind and enter into time alone with God
DEFINITION	The practice of solitude involves scheduling enough uninterrupted time in a distraction-free environment that you experience isolation and are alone with God. Solitude is a "container discipline" for the practice of other spiritual disciplines.
SCRIPTURE	<p>✕ "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)</p> <p>The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." (1 Kings 19:11)</p> <p>"Let him sit alone in silence for the LORD has laid it on him." (Lamentations 3:28)</p>
PRACTICE INCLUDES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • giving God time and space that is not in competition with social contact, noise or stimulation • taking a retreat • observing sabbath refreshment by abstaining from constant interaction with others, information and activities • addressing your addiction to being seen • communing with God alone while you walk or run by yourself • practicing disciplines alone: study, prayer, examen, journaling and so forth
GOD-GIVEN FRUIT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • freedom from the need to be occupied and stimulated • moving away from letting the world "squeeze you into its mold" (Romans 12:2) • liberation from constantly living your life in reference to other people • quieting the internal noise so you can better listen to God • giving yourself time and space to internalize what you already know • speaking only what you hear from God rather than out of your store of opinions • including solitude and retreat as part of your lifestyle

SOLITUDE



THOUGH WE MAY BE UNFAMILIAR WITH the discipline of solitude, most of us recognize it as something we wanted when we were first in love. It didn't matter if the time spent together accomplished anything very useful or important to the world at large. It was simply the way we let our beloved know that he or she mattered. In order to show love, we sought time alone together.

The Song of Songs is a mysteriously wonderful book of the Bible. It gives a glimpse of lovers who want to be alone so they can express the full range of their love for one another. The church regards this book as descriptive of human love as well as of divine love. God longs to commune with his children. He beckons, "Arise, come, my darling; / my beautiful one, come with me" (Song of Songs 2:13). In solitude the heart waits for God, and God alone. Here the soul opens wide to listen and receive.

Jesus began his ministry with forty formative days of solitude. No doubt Jesus intended to commune with God alone, but he also encountered the tempter in that desert place. Mark writes, "At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan" (Mark 1:12). Solitude is a formative place because it gives God's Spirit time and space to do deep work. When no one is there to watch, judge and interpret what we say, the Spirit often brings us face to face with hidden motives and compulsions. The world of recognition, achievement and applause disappears, and we stand squarely before God without props. In solitude Jesus did battle with the intoxicating possibilities of achieving his kingdom and identity in the power of the self. He faced down the self Satan offered and instead chose his true identity as the beloved Son. Throughout his three years of ministry Jesus returned again and again to solitude, where the rush of attention and the accolades of the crowds could be put into their proper perspective. Solitude with God was a way Jesus remained in touch with his true identity in God.

Most of us can identify with the intoxicating feeling that comes when we are the center of attention. Solitude is a discipline that gets behind those feelings to who we are when we feel invisible and unrecognized. Who are we when productivity and recognition fall away and God is the only one watching us? Some of us simply seem to lose our sense of

self when there is no one to mirror back who we are. Without the oxygen of doing and the mirror of approval, our feelings of being real and important evaporate. Hollow places open up in our heart, and our soul feels empty and bare. We can feel agitated, scattered and distracted. These disconcerting feelings do two things for us. They reveal how much of our identity is embedded in a false sense of self. And they show us how easy it is to avoid solitude because we dislike being unproductive and unapplauded.

But we need solitude if we intend to unmask the false self and its important-looking image. Alone, without distractions, we put ourselves in a place where God can reveal things to us that we might not notice in the normal preoccupations of life. Solitude opens a space where we can bring our empty and compulsive selves to God. And no matter how well we “do” silence, God is there to accept, receive and love us. God longs for us to be our true self in Christ. He wants us to be who we are meant to be. In solitude we see how little we embrace our true identity in Christ. And we find the truth of who we are in Christ. We are the beloved, and God is pleased with us. This identity is given; it is not earned. Many other voices pull at us, seeking to own and name us, but in solitude we learn what it is to distinguish between the voice of God and the voices of the world. (This is sometimes called the “discernment of spirits” [1 John 4:1].) Times of solitude can be sweet times, but they can also be dark times when God seems to remain withdrawn and silent. We seek the Lord, but he doesn’t seem to show up. These times of testing, or the “dark nights,” like Jesus had in the wilderness, are well documented in the lives of the saints. Don’t be afraid of the darkness or the solitude. Stay with God. The light will eventually dawn.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How and when do you resist or avoid being alone?
2. What tends to pop into your mind when you are alone?
3. What do you resort to doing when alone?
4. What troubles you or makes you antsy about being alone?
5. When have you felt most comfortable being alone?

Most uncomfortable?

6. What sense of God do you have when you are alone?

SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

1. In a place where you can’t be interrupted, intentionally place yourself in the presence of God. Recognize that the Lord is as near as your own breathing. Inhale God’s breath of life; exhale all that weighs on you. Simply be alone with God. • When it is time to return to others, leave the presence of God gently. Carry the sense of being alone with God with you into the next thing.
2. Spend fifteen minutes or more alone with God. You can do an activity if you wish: walk, run, drive, iron. Dedicate the time ahead of you to God. • After the time is up, con-

- sider how it was for you to be alone with God. Was it hard? Good? Did God speak to you in any way?
3. Make the time you spend in the shower each morning your alone time with God. Present yourself to your Creator—all of your body, all of the dirt that has accumulated in your soul, all that God has made you to be. Let the water from the shower remind you of the water of life that nourishes and changes you. Let the warmth touch you with love. If you like a cold shower, let the bracing impact call you to live your life to the full. Offer yourself to God for the day. Thank him for the alone time he spends with you.
 4. Set aside half a day for time alone with God. Go to a retreat center, quiet chapel or park. Don't stay in your home. Take only your Bible. (See the appendix "Spending Time with God.")

Resources on Solitude

Invitation to Solitude and Silence by Ruth Haley Barton

Surrender to Love by David Benner