



Week 7: Silence and Solitude

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 NIV

Defining the practice

The practice of silence and solitude involves temporarily separating ourselves from the distractions of everyday life so we can more easily hear God's voice. It is a demonstration of our love for God because we choose to leave the company of other people so we can spend time alone with God. Engaging in silence and solitude creates space where we can rest in God's presence. We might enjoy the physical rest of not working or catching up on sleep, or the mental and emotional rest of simply being still without expectations.

It is possible to find solitude without physical separation. Solitude can happen in the midst of a busy day as we draw upon the inner peace God grants to us through the Holy Spirit. Silence and solitude can be as simple as noticing the fullness of the details around us. In this way, we are practicing being fully present with God, ourselves, and others.

Foundations from scripture

In the Old Testament, the practice of silence is encouraged in the book of Ecclesiastes. The writer, who is known as the Teacher, suggests that limiting our words is a good idea while we are in the presence of God.

*There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens...
...a time to be silent and a time to speak...*

–Ecclesiastes 3:1,7b NIV

Guard your steps when you go to the house of God; to draw near to listen is better than the sacrifice offered by fools; for they do not know how to keep from doing evil. Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick



***to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth;
therefore let your words be few.***

–Ecclesiastes 5:1-2 NRSV

The combination of silence and solitude characterized the life and work of Jesus. There are numerous examples of him leaving his disciples and the crowds to go pray alone. Jesus' public ministry began with a period of silence and solitude in the wilderness. This time of isolation prepared him for the testing that followed.

The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.

–Mark 1:12-13 ESV

Jesus spent the entire night in solitary prayer right before he named his closest followers.

Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles...

–Luke 6:12-13 NRSV

Jesus avoided the crowds after the feeding of the five thousand by immediately heading into solitude. He followed this by the miracle of walking on water to join the disciples again.

After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself. When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, where they got into a boat and set off across the lake for Capernaum. By now it was dark, and Jesus had not yet joined them.

–John 6:14-17 NIV

When Jesus sent out the twelve disciples into the towns and villages, they returned to him both excited and exhausted by all that had transpired. He advised them to adopt his practice of silence and solitude in order to rest and recover from their labors.



The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place.

–Mark 6:30-32 NIV

Solitude is also featured in the Passion story as Jesus withdrew from his disciples to pray alone in the garden of Gethsemane before his arrest and crucifixion.

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray."

–Matthew 26:36 NIV

Themes of silence and solitude

From these texts, and others throughout scripture, several themes of silence and solitude emerge.

- Just as there are times when talking is appropriate, there are moments when silence is the wisest course of action.
Silence and solitude help us learn to be thoughtful in our responses.
- Throughout Jesus' ministry, his practice of silence and solitude coincided with some of his biggest miracles or periods of testing.
Silence and solitude can prepare us for trials or significant ministry work.
- Jesus used silence and solitude as a regular part of his prayer life.
Silence and solitude are about deepening our relationship with God through times of undistracted and focused prayer.
- Jesus encouraged his disciples to spend time in silence and solitude after their big spiritual victory.
Silence and solitude allow us to rest from our work and be restored by spending time in God's healing presence.
- Jesus withdrew from the crowds at intense moments in his public ministry.
Silence and solitude can help balance our need for attention and affirmation from other people.



Beyond not talking

Silence is more than just refraining from speaking. It is about actively listening for God. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we can learn to quiet the noise inside us so we can be attentive in God's presence.

Whether we are comfortable—or uncomfortable—sitting in silence with God may be a reflection of our relationship with him. With someone we know well, we often find it easy to be with that person without talking. This is a form of trust that is built over time. The same can happen with God; as we seek him in silence, we will become more accustomed to engaging with him in this way.

God's presence

We have the assurance that God is always with us. The Bible offers us numerous examples of God promising to remain with his people. In the Old Testament, Moses publicly confirmed to Joshua that God would never leave him:

"The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged."

–Deuteronomy 31:8 NIV

In the New Testament, Jesus proclaimed that his presence would remain with his followers perpetually:

"And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

–Matthew 28:20b NRSV

When we are with God in silence and solitude, we can claim these promises at those moments when we can't perceive God's presence. He is still there. We are not alone.



Methods of silence and solitude

The goal of silence and solitude is separation from the distractions of everyday life in order to better focus on God and his voice. This can happen either by withdrawing physically or withdrawing mentally.

Types of withdrawal

Physical withdrawal is where we separate from other people. This means finding a space beyond our normal routine where we can be alone with God. We focus on developing an outer silence based on our environment.

Mental withdrawal is where we remain in community but work to develop our inner sanctuary of quiet regardless of our external circumstances. We stay in our regular routines and look for ways to engage with God through an inner silence.

Alone together

When we are just beginning the practice of silence and solitude, we may need to experience physical withdrawal first before we can attempt mental withdrawal. We use physical solitude to prepare us for finding mental solitude while we are in the company of others. Solitude is more than just the absence of other people. We can cultivate a quiet, inner attentiveness to God even in the midst of our everyday lives. It may not always be feasible to travel to a separate location, so the practice becomes similar to centering prayer when we silently pause to experience God's presence right where we are.

Ideas for daily life

Here are some possible ways to experience silence and solitude in your everyday routine. What other ways might you incorporate this practice into your day?

- Drive with the car radio turned off and pray during your commute.
- Dedicate your time in the shower to God.
- Turn off the TV and be present with God in the silence.
- Take a walk in nature without wearing earbuds.
- Be intentional about noticing God's presence as you wash dishes or do other household tasks.
- Close your office door during lunch and take a break with God in silence.
- Spend time in quiet reflection after your kids are in bed.



Noticing practice

The following practice is a variation of silence and solitude that can be done anywhere. It is about being present in your current surroundings and paying careful attention to the details of your environment. As you notice, you are invited to reflect on whether the things you see reveal something to you about God. You can adopt this practice anytime you are alone.

Steps for noticing



- Withdraw to a quiet place where you won't be disturbed.
- Begin with prayer, asking God to meet you in this space and reveal something about himself to you.
- As you sit in silence, notice the details of what is around you.
- Note the colors, sounds, textures, scents, and movement of your current environment.
- Consider how what you observe may reveal something to you about God and his character.
- Bring your observations to him in prayer.
- As you prepare to return, thank God for the time you spent together.

Questions to ask yourself

The practice of noticing is about learning to see the world through new eyes. Here are some questions you can ask yourself:

- How might you incorporate elements of noticing and being present as you go about your day?
- What might you discover about God through the things you observe?



Going on retreat

One way to practice silence and solitude is to spend a night, weekend, or several days away from home on retreat. Intentionally removing yourself from your regular routine places you in a distraction-free environment where you can more easily focus your attention on God.

Here are some guidelines to help you prepare for a retreat experience.



Choose your location wisely. Find out about the particulars of your retreat venue. Will you have a private sleeping area? Does the facility provide food? Is there indoor plumbing? Make sure you select a center with the amenities you need. You want to spend your time focusing on God rather than on concerns about the retreat experience itself.



Hold your plans loosely. You can go into the retreat time with some ideas about things you want to focus on. These could include areas where you would like to grow spiritually. However, God will ultimately set the agenda. Remain flexible and open to God's leading before, during, and after the retreat.



Pray for God's guidance. Invite God into every step of the journey and be prepared for both expected and unexpected experiences and answers. Let others know you are embarking on this time alone with God so they can pray for you as well.



Be thoughtful about resources. Any books you bring on the retreat are invitations to allow that particular author's voice into your space with God. Limit yourself to one or two key resources in addition to the Bible. Select those titles with care, asking God to guide you. It's most important to keep the space open for God to speak.



Adjust your expectations. You may have a "mountaintop experience" where you clearly hear from God. Or you may not. It's not the experience itself that matters; what's important is that you are placing yourself before God and affirming your love for God with your choice to do so. Release any expectations about what might happen and allow things to unfold in the Spirit's timing.



Bring a journal. You are encouraged to record the details of your retreat, from your own thoughts to what God revealed to you during your time with him. You may want to note any scripture passages that were particularly meaningful for you.



Leave your phone. As much as possible, turn off your devices or leave them in your car. You want to limit distractions during your time alone with God.



Combine the practices. When you are observing silence and solitude on retreat, you have time and space to try other practices such as intercessory prayer, fasting, scripture meditation, and many others.



Be patient. It takes time and practice to get comfortable with silence and solitude. You might feel restless at first as you settle into being by yourself. Each day of the retreat experience—and each time you go on a new retreat—will help you become more used to being quiet and alone in the presence of God.



Allow yourself to rest. You may find that what you need most is rest, sleep, and rejuvenation. You don't have to push yourself to accomplish anything. Pay attention to your body and spend time sleeping, walking, eating, and sitting in silence.



Carry your experience forward. The practice of silence and solitude should affect the way you live. Bring the things God teaches you in solitude back to your daily routine and let them influence and shape your life and relationships.

Enjoy some sleep

The act of resting is biblical. Consider these words from the psalmist about God's gift of rest to his beloved children:

It's useless to rise early and go to bed late, and work your worried fingers to the bone. Don't you know he enjoys giving rest to those he loves?

—Psalm 127:2 MSG

Role of the community

The practice of silence and solitude continues after you return from your experience with God. The community plays an important role in helping you discern the message God provided to you during your time with him.

Take time to reflect afterward. It's often a good idea to debrief your experience with a trusted spiritual friend or mentor. One of the important components of a silence and solitude retreat is sharing with your faith community what God revealed to you in that time. Conversations with those you trust can help you better determine what God was speaking to you.



Restoring relationships

Because God wants us to love other people, he may speak to you about your relationships during your silence and solitude. You may leave your retreat experience with a prompt to have an overdue conversation with someone or address a longstanding issue.



Prayer practice

Generous Father, help me discern whether you are calling me into a time of silence and solitude with you. Prompt me to respond to your invitation by opening space in my schedule and preparing my heart to join you. Draw me near to you, and deepen my love for you and my love for others through this practice. Let me experience the joy and rest of being in your presence. I ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light. Amen.

An act of trust

Practicing silence and solitude requires taking a break from our responsibilities. We trust that God will care for the needs of others while we're away. This practice helps us remember that we are not in charge of everything—God is. It mirrors the biblical concept of the Sabbath rest, where we pause from our labor to honor God.

Sometimes the hardest step of silence and solitude is the first one, where we intentionally set aside all that we need to do in order to seek God. It helps to remember that Jesus first modeled this for us by not accomplishing every task set before him. Crowds gathered around him wherever he went, and many were looking for miraculous healings. Yet Jesus often left while the crowd was still gathered (Matthew 8:18, 13:36, and many other Gospel references). He delayed his arrival for the purpose of increasing God's glory (John 11:6-7, 14-15, 40). Jesus also selectively healed certain individuals while leaving others unhealed (John 5:1-15). He stayed focused on his mission by following his Father's instructions and entrusting the needs of the people into his Father's capable hands.

We can do the same. We trust God when we lay down our heavy loads. We are invited to join God in silence and solitude for a time of renewal and refreshment. Only then can we again take up the work God has given us to do.



Finding balance

Some people feel most comfortable being in community with others. Other people are happiest being by themselves. Both of these situations can become unhealthy for us if one is not balanced by the other. If we are constantly in a crowd, we need to spend time alone. If we are isolated, we need fellowship. We are encouraged to regularly move back and forth between being in community and being alone.

The practice of silence and solitude can help us achieve balance no matter which end of the spectrum we most enjoy. It offers renewal for those who enjoy the quiet, and it provides a healthy challenge to those who are less comfortable being separated from other people.





Reflection and discussion

Answer this question before taking part in silence and solitude during the session.

1. As you consider silence and solitude, which parts of the practice would be easiest for you? Which might be more difficult? How might God help you overcome any difficulties?

Find a quiet space where you are alone. Go through the steps of the noticing practice. Then answer these questions.

2. What was it like to sit alone with God in silence and notice your surroundings? Note what you observed. From the things you saw, did you discover anything about God?
3. Was there anything that was especially easy for you about the practice? Was there anything particularly difficult?
4. After this experience of silence and solitude, would you change any of your answers to the first question above? Why or why not?



Breaking the barriers

Here are possible objections and hurdles you may face as you consider beginning the practice of silence and solitude. Reflecting on the responses below can help you overcome any false assumptions or beliefs you might hold about the practice, about yourself, or about God.

- **I'm a little nervous about trying this. Is it scary? What if I'm afraid to be alone?**
While the practice of "solitude" seems to suggest that you'll be all by yourself, you are actually not alone. God is present with you before, during, and after.
- **What is silence and solitude actually like? What kinds of things might happen?**
Your experience could be totally ordinary, which means you might spend time caring for your body's physical needs while thinking about God and reading his word. Or you might have a profound encounter where God gives you a clear message. The practice of silence and solitude is often somewhere in between, with most of the time spent on routine matters and small moments dedicated to the extraordinary.
- **What if it seems like God isn't doing anything?**
Sometimes the fruit of silence and solitude comes later, like when you're in the midst of a hectic day and you respond with peace rather than worry. The practice will likely show up in your everyday routine as a changed reaction or behavior. If you're unsure about what happened during your time with God, you can turn to your faith community or spiritual friends afterward. Let people you trust help you interpret God's message to you.

Key things to remember

- The practice of silence and solitude is about listening carefully for God.
- God is present with us even when it seems like he's not there.
- Withdrawing from others physically helps us practice silence and solitude so we can draw upon our quiet inner sanctuary right where we are.
- Spending time alone with God benefits us because it shapes us to be more like him.
- Even if it seems like nothing is happening in our times of silence and solitude, God is at work within us.



3. Did this practice work for you? In other words, did it help you connect with God? Why or why not? Is there anything you want to try differently to deepen your practice of silence and solitude next time?

4. How do you think God might use this practice to further develop your relationship with him?

