The Spiritual Discipline of Silence and Solitude

I. We live in a world of Noise
   a. I was reading a Buzzfeed article that talked about all the things that are different about moving to the big city from a small town. As it listed different things I realized that they were the opposite for me.
      i. I miss noise. I miss airplanes, sirens, highway hum, trains, helicopters.
      ii. I thought how bizarre that the quietness of living here really gets to me. I thought about how if I don’t know where my phone is I get kind of nervous. I even said the words to Chrissy, “I’m a pastor, I need my phone!”
      iii. We are a culture that thrives on noise and silence makes us uncomfortable.
      iv. Let me show you an example (silence). That was 30 seconds of silence!
   b. Yet there is sometimes something so appealing and transforming about silence and solitude.
      i. Next to Jesus, Moses and Paul were two of the most influential men in Scripture. Paul wrote most of the NT, and Moses wrote the first five.
      ii. Both of their lives were transformed by periods of isolation in a remote wilderness.
      iii. And there are times in our pressure cooker life where the idea of escape to a hidden place are so compelling both in our personal lives and in our Christian walk.
   c. However when we think of the Christian life we think of responsibilities that involve other people.
      i. Biblical reality calls us to family, fellowship, evangelism, and ministry for the sake of Christ and his Kingdom, but there is still a part of us that craves silence and solitude.
ii. This is not a sinful thing, silence and solitude is a spiritual discipline with the discipline in finding the balance of too little and too much.

iii. Tonight and next Sunday night we will look at what exactly these disciplines are, look at biblical reasons for practicing them, and talk about ways to start practicing them.

II. Definition

a. A good place to always start is with a definition.

b. Silence is the voluntary and temporary abstention from speaking so that certain spiritual goals might be sought.
   i. Sometimes silence is observed to read, write, or pray.
   ii. Though there is no outward speaking there is internal dialogues with us and with God. I guess this silence is “outward silence.”
   iii. Sometimes we are silence is also inward if we are listening for God.

c. Solitude is the spiritual discipline of voluntary and temporarily withdrawing to privacy for spiritual purposes.
   i. It may last a few minutes or days.
   ii. It can be about participating without interruption in other Spiritual disciplines or just to be alone with God.

d. Three thoughts before we go deeper.
   i. Think of silence and solitude as complementary disciplines to fellowship.
      1. Without silence and solitude we are shallow, without fellowship we are stagnant. We need both.
   ii. Silence and solitude are usually found together. For our purposes we will look at them as a pair.
iii. Remember what I said earlier, we are conditioned to be comfortable with noise and distraction. Jean Fleming in her book Finding Focus in a Whirlwind World said, “We live in a noisy, busy world. Silence and solitude are not twentieth-century words. They fit the era of Victorian lace, high-button shoes, and kerosene lamps better than our age of television, video arcades, and joggers wired with earphones. We have become a people with an aversion to quiet and uneasiness with being alone.”

1. This book was written 23 years ago and things have only gotten worse.

III. Biblical Reasons for Silence and Solitude

i. Follow Jesus’ Example:

1. We have seen it in our study of Luke, but there are many times that Jesus practiced silence and solitude. Let’s look at four of these times.

2. Matthew 4:1

   a. “Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.”

   b. Jesus led by the Holy Spirit went into the desert for 40 days of silence and solitude and fasting which prepared him for an intense encounter with Satan.


3. Matthew 14:23

   a. “After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone.”

   b. Jesus sent the seeking multitudes and his disciples away to spend time with his Father.
4. Mark 1:35
   a. “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.”
   b. This passage also tells us that after dark people gathered outside the house to be healed and have demons cast out.
      i. He knew that if he had waited until later in the morning he could not have had solitude.

5. Luke 4:42
   a. “At Daybreak Jesus went out to a solitary place. The people were looking for him and when they came to where he was, they tried to keep him from leaving them.”
   b. These people were looking for Jesus because they had real needs that he had to power to meet all of those needs and yet he still took time to be alone. We love to be needed, the feeling of being able to do something that no one else can do, but Jesus truly had this and he did not fall to the temptation. He understood the importance of disciplining himself to be alone.

ii. To Hear the Voice of God Better
   1. One of the more obvious reasons for getting away from earthly noises and human voices is to hear the Voice from heaven better. Biblical example of this include Elijah going to Mount Horeb where he heard the gentle whisper of God’s voice (1 Kings 19:11-13)
      a. Habakkuk standing on the guard post and keeping watch to see what God would say to him (Habakkuk 2:1)
b. The apostle Paul going away to Arabia after his conversion so he could be alone with God (Galatians 1:17).

2. I don’t think we have to get away from everything to hear and talk with God, there are definitely times to eliminate noise and focus on listening.
   a. When I read my Bible I turn off everything so that I can really focus. I need the quiet.

3. Jonathan Edwards often spoke about how doing this was the secret of his wife’s Godliness.
   a. “She hardly cares for anything, except to meditate on Him...She loves to be alone, walking in the fields and groves, and seems to have someone invisible always conversing with her.”
   b. We may not have fields and groves but we have a great state park, and walking trails and we can find a place to be alone to hear God better.

iii. To Express Worship to God

1. The worship of our God does not always require words, sounds, or actions. Sometimes worship consists of a God-focused stillness and hush.
   a. Habakkuk 2:20 – “But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before Him.”
   b. Zephaniah 1:7 – “Be silent before the Sovereign Lord.”

2. There are times to speak to God, and there are times to simply adore Him in silence.
3. A great dead preacher George Whitfield described one of these moments in his home. “God was pleased to pour into my soul a great spirit of supplication, and a sense of his free, distinguishing mercies so filled me with love, humility, and joy and holy confusion that I could at last only pour out my heart before Him in an awful silence. I was so full that I could not well speak.”

4. Worshiping in silence may happen for us because our hearts are so full that words cannot express our love, but it can also be the opposite where we feel so empty that any word seems hypocritical. Regardless there is always a place for silent worship.

iv. To Express Faith in God

1. The simple act of silence before the Lord as opposed to coming to him with a great many words can be a demonstration of faith in Him.
   a. Psalm 62:1-2 – “My soul waits in silence for God only; from Him is my salvation. He only is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold; I shall not be greatly shaken.”
   b. Psalm 62:5-6 – “My soul, wait in silence for god only, for my hope is from Him. He only is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold; I shall not be shaken.”
   c. Isaiah 30:15 – “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.”

2. Faith for us is often expressed in prayer, but sometimes we can express our trust in his sovereign control through quiet.

3. There was a man who was a missionary to the American Indians named David Brainerd. He expressed this idea in his journal on Wednesday, April 28, 1742.
a. I withdrew to my usual place of retirement in great peace and tranquility; spent about two hours in secret duties and felt much as I did yesterday morning, only weaker and more overcome. I seemed to depend wholly upon my dear Lord, wholly weaned from all other dependences. I knew not what to say to my God, but only lean on his bosom, as it were, and breathe our my desire after a perfect conformity to him in all things. Thirsting desires and insatiable longings possessed my soul after perfect holiness. God was so precious to my soul that the world with all its enjoyments was infinitely vile. I had no more value for all the favor of men than pebbles. The Lord was my ALL; and that He overruled all greatly delighted me. I think my faith and dependence upon God scarce ever rose so high. I saw Him such a fountain of goodness that it seemed impossible I should distrust him again, or be any way anxious about anything that should happen to me.

4. Few of us could express it so well in a journal like him, but we can express our faith to God in ways that He thinks are beautiful through seasons of eloquent silence and solitude.

v. To Seek the Salvation of the Lord

1. A time of silence and solitude to seek the salvation of God can refer to a non-Christian seeking salvation from sin and guilt or to a believer who is seeking God’s salvation from circumstances.
2. Lamentation 3:25-28 is a call to either case.
   a. “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 you. Let him sit alone in silence, for the Lord has laid it on him.”

3. Often times the only time people seriously considering salvation is during the hymn of response after the sermon where silence is masked by music and singing.
   a. Silence and solitude’s value is massive when one is coming to grips with the depth of sin, the judgment of God, and the hope of the cross. We should encourage those seeking God to get alone with God and looks at their life against what Scripture says about them.

vi. To Be Physically and Spiritually Restored
   1. Everyone in this room, everyone in this church has a regular need for restoring the resources both physically and spiritually. This was even true for Jesus and the apostles.
      a. In Mark 6:31 Jesus spoke to his apostles about their need to rest. “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.’ For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.”

   2. Though many of us won’t let ourselves rest and relax, we need to get away from our stresses and enjoy the restoration that silence and solitude can provide to us.

vii. To Regain a Spiritual Perspective
   1. Silence and Solitude is a good way to step back and get a more balanced, less worldly perspective.
2. Back at Christmas we looked at Luke Chapter 1 where Zechariah was struck mute by Gabriel at his unbelief about having a son.
   a. After being silent for 9 months he was silent and when he announced the birth of his son and wrote his name as John, his mouth was opened and he immediately began praising God.
3. This isn't a positive example because his silence was punishment, but Zechariah definitely regained correct perspective about God.

viii. To Seek The Will of God
1. This is the purpose most of us will seek out silence and solitude.
2. We've seen how Jesus often did this when he was faced with a decision.
   a. In Luke 6:12-13, when Jesus was deciding who he would choose to be apostles, “One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, who he also designated apostles.”
3. One Christian who practiced this was British missionary Hudson Taylor.
   a. Hudson had been successful as a missionary in China and while in Brighton on sabbatical he felt the Lord calling him to do what no other missionary society had done before. Move inland. Most missionaries focused on the coasts of countries. Taylor was afraid of this because he was fearful of leading it, he knew how difficult it would be to recruit missionaries, and raise the support.
b. Hudson went down to the beach to be alone and quiet with the Lord. It was there in the quiet that God made known his will to Taylor. “Why, if we are obeying the Lord, the responsibility rests with Him, not with us! Thou, Lord, Thou shalt have all the burden! At Thy bidding, as thy servant I go forward, leaving results with Thee.”

c. Hudson had the first restful sleep he had in some time and through his seeking silence and solitude to seek God’s will China Inland Mission was started and continues today as Overseas Missionary Fellowship which continues to bring the word of God to the Chinese.

4. God often make His will clear to us in public, but there are times when He discloses it only in private in silence and solitude.

ix. To Learn Control of the Tongue

1. Learning to keep silent for extended periods of time can help us control our tongue all the time.

   a. James 3:7-10 says, “For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. IT is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth comes blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.”
b. Proverbs 17:27-28 says, “A man of knowledge uses words with restraint, and a man of understanding is even-tempered. Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue.”

2. So how are the disciplines of silence and solitude helpful in learning to control the tongue?
   a. When we fast we learn that much of the food we eat is really unnecessary.
      i. When we practice silence and solitude we learn that we don’t need to say everything we think we need to say.
      ii. In silence we learn to rely more on God’s control in situations where we would normally feel the need to speak, or to speak too much.
      iii. Our skills of listening and observation are also sharpened.
   x. Helps Develop the Other Disciplines
      1. Other disciplines like study, prayer, fasting, journaling, learning all require the need of silence and solitude. In this way the disciplines of Silence and Solitude help us to develop other Spiritual disciplines.

IV. Suggestions for Silence and Solitude
a. Some people find the discipline of silence and solitude a very natural thing, but for most of us we enjoy it like we enjoy action movies or stories of great adventure. Vicariously from afar, only dreaming of being involved but never entering in. Here are some practical ways to make silence and solitude a reality and habit.
   i. “Minute” Retreats
      1. Two weeks ago I showed you just how long 30 seconds of quiet really felt.
2. Now double that and take several one minute retreats throughout the day.
   a. Maybe at a stop light, in line at the bank, on hold on the phone. Take time during a pre meal prayer
   b. Take the time to quiet your thoughts.
3. The key is not just relaxing and taking a breather, but look to Christ and listen to the Spirit. It is practicing the words of the hymn, “Take my moments and my days, let them flow in ceaseless praise.”
4. Even if these moments are not completely silent or alone, take these seconds to enjoy the restoration found in the conscious presence of Jesus.

ii. A Goal of Daily Silence and Solitude
1. This is absolutely one of the most important things for a person desiring to grow in the Christian walk.
   a. Devoting time in our day to being alone with God.
      Outward silence, time for bible intake, meditation and prayer.
2. I know this is difficult because of all the things that require our constant attention.
   a. Jim Elliot said, “I think the devil has made it his business to monopolize on three elements: noise, hurry, and crowds. Satan is quite aware of the power of silence.”
3. Unless we plan these daily time into our schedule, the busyness of life will crowd them out.

iii. Getting Away for Solitude and Silence
1. Getting away for an extended time of silence and solitude may be nothing more than finding an empty room here at the church to spend an afternoon or evening, or even a Saturday.
a. It could also be a retreat center, a cabin, or even a tent for the weekend.

b. Take nothing but your bible and a notebook. Maybe even a great book about the Christian life.

c. If you’ve never been on a retreat like this you might think it will be boring and will drag on, but once you’re there you will be amazed how quickly the time goes, so make a schedule of things you want to accomplish during your silent and solitude retreat.

2. These getaways are wonderful, but don’t forget that the disciplines including silence and solitude were meant for common practice in our daily lives, don’t wait until these retreats to practice.

iv. Special Places

1. Locate special places that can be used for silence and solitude. They can be within your home, within walking distance, within a few minutes drive, and for overnight or longer retreats.

   a. Welsh preacher Howell Harris loved to climb up and sit in a bell tower in his church at Llangasty.

   b. Jonathan Edwards loved open fields and wooded areas. “I rode out into the woods for my health…having alighted from my horse in a retired place, as my manner commonly has been, to walk for divine contemplation and prayer.”
c. Susanna Wesley, mother of John and Charles Wesley, had a very large family so physical isolation was scarce. It is well known that when she needed silence and solitude she would bring her apron up over her head and read her Bible and pray underneath it. This didn’t block out all the noise, but it was a sign to her children that for those minutes she was not to be bothered and the older children were to care for the younger.

2. You may not be able to do many of these things, but find a place(s) where its possible for you to pursue Godliness through silence and solitude.

v. Trade Off Daily Responsibilities

1. This is the answer for those who say, “You don’t know my situation! I have a family to feed and take care of.”
   a. Most people who practice this discipline have the same commitments.

2. The most practical and inexpensive solution is to ask a friend of spouse to temporarily take your burden so that you may seek out some quiet time with God and in return you provide the same for them, or something that helps them out.
   a. Warning, reality can hit especially hard when you come home again. As rough as it is sometimes to come back to the stress and noise of our lives, this only proves how much we need the refreshment of silence and solitude.