
Silence

"I have often repented of having spoken, but never of having remained silent." – Arsenius

As we begin our journey of exploring various disciplines, it is important to grasp from the very start the truth that we are given a conversational relationship with Jesus. Jesus wants to speak to us! He will speak to us and we can learn to recognize his voice. This is why silence becomes so crucial. There are two aspects within this discipline. The first is to pursue silence as **the absence of noise**. Many of us are so used to living in noise that we are afraid of silence. We do whatever is necessary to avoid it. Dallas Willard says "silence is frightening because it strips us as nothing else does, throwing us upon the stark realities of our life. . . Think what it says about the inward emptiness of our lives if we must *always* turn on the tape player or radio to make sure something is happening around us."¹ Silence helps us to cut through the voices and distractions of our noisy world and listen for God's "still small voice." It becomes rather obvious that if God's voice is "still" and "small" that we need to be both still and small in order to hear it. The best way to do this is through silence.

A second arena of this discipline is to practice the silence of **not speaking**. Silence is more easily practiced in solitude since it is more difficult to be silent in the presence of others. The Bible's admonitions about the tongue are important to consider here. James says: "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless" (James 1:26). Then a little later on he says, "Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell." (James 3:5-6).

The discipline of silence is one of three foundational disciplines in addition to solitude and prayer. Henri Nouwen has said,

*Clearly silence is a discipline needed in many different situations: in teaching and learning, in preaching and worship, in visiting and counseling. Silence is a very concrete, practical, and useful discipline in all our ministerial tasks. It can be seen as a portable cell taken with us from the solitary place to the midst of our ministry. Silence is solitude practiced in action.*²

Listening is very important to the discipline of silence. You must pay attention. You must want to hear. This will not come easy for most, so you must persist with this. We often use our ears not to hear, but to sort. We listen merely to identify what is coming that we do not want to hear. Many people only hear what they assume is what they have always heard. Listening through the discipline of silence must get beyond these tendencies.

- If you want to learn the value of silence, how to recognize God's voice, and how to distinguish God's voice from the voices of others, begin by asking God to teach you about this. It is important to persist with this discipline, especially if your mind is racing. It often takes awhile for our minds to quiet down.
- To assist you in cultivating quietness, there are several practices you can experiment with. One is the devotional use of Scripture. Take a verse, such as Psalm 23:1, and repeat it silently. As you repeat it many times, emphasize different parts of the verse and let this speak to you.
- An exercise that might be helpful encourages us to listen more deeply to our surroundings. Start by sitting quietly, listening to your breathing. Then enlarge your listening to include the room you are sitting in. Slowly listen for sounds coming from other places in the building you are in. Then include the sounds outside such as birds, traffic, a lawnmower, etc. By extending the range of your listening in this way, your mind can become less obsessed with particular concerns and more sensitive to the space in which all sounds are happening.³
- You might attempt to spend a day using as few words as possible, and complete silence if possible. It is best to do this without telling anyone what you are doing. As you go through your day, take note of tendencies such as desiring to fill empty space with talking, how being silent aids you in listening, etc. At the end of your day you might find it helpful to write down what you observed and learned.
- If it is difficult for you to find a place of silence in the midst of your daily work and family life, you might consider getting up in the middle of the night for a short period of time.

¹ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 163.

² Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981), 30.

³ Roger Housden, *Retreat – Time Apart for Silence & Solitude* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995), 5.