
Solitude

Solitude is the practice of being alone. Solitude needs to have priority among the various disciplines. Dallas Willard says, "Of all the disciplines of abstinence, solitude is generally the most fundamental in the beginning of the spiritual life, and it must be returned to again and again as that life develops."¹ It will provide the foundation for the practice of many other disciplines, such as silence and prayer.

The practice of solitude is easily passed over in the Bible. Many of the most prominent characters in Scripture made solitude a part of their lives. Jesus practiced solitude throughout his life and ministry. At the beginning of his ministry he went to the wilderness for an extended period of fasting and prayer (Matthew 4:1-2). He sought solitude prior to preaching (Mark 1:35-39), after he had healed a leper (Mark 1:45), after hearing about the death of John the Baptist (Matthew 14:13), after his followers had been involved in ministry (Matthew 14:23), and before he chose the disciples (Luke 6:12-16). At the end of his life he sought solitude in the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36ff).

What makes solitude so important? John Ortberg says, "Solitude is the one place where we can gain freedom from the forces of society that will otherwise relentlessly mold us."² Henri Nouwen describes solitude as "the furnace of transformation."³ If Jesus needed time to be with the Father, how much more do we need this time?

The first question people usually have when learning about solitude is: "What do we do during the time?" The best answer to this question is: "Nothing." While at first you might feel like this is a waste of time, allow these feelings to cause you to consider that your worth is not determined by you always needing to keep busy or be "doing" something. For many it is a temptation to take things with them such as books, tapes, a "to-do" list, your calendar, or even that project you've been meaning to get done. You might even be tempted to bring your laptop computer! One of the most important principles to grasp is that solitude is not about doing something . . . it is about *not* doing something. Richard Foster says: "What we must clearly understand and underscore is that our real task [in solitude] is to create a space in our lives where God can reach us. Once that space has been created we wait quietly, expectantly. From this point on, the work belongs to God."⁴

In solitude, it is important to listen . . . to pay attention to what comes to you. Our desire is to hear Jesus, but there will be many voices. One of the greatest challenges of solitude is to sort through these "voices" and learn to put them aside so that we can hear Jesus. A first step here might be to identify these other voices and what it is they are saying. You might even take time to write these down. If you can identify the influence these voices are having on your life, you will have a much easier time moving beyond these influences to the voice of God.

There are many ways to build the practice of solitude into your life. These include regular alone times with God, preferably on a daily basis. It is good to plan special times maybe weekly or monthly where we can spend a few hours to a day in solitude. We also need periodic extended times, once or twice a year, where we can have several days. Don't worry if it is very difficult at first. It becomes easier or more natural each time you practice it. Like recovery from any sickness, healing takes time.

- Solitude rarely happens unless we schedule it. Therefore, the first step is to get out your calendar and schedule the time in. Determine where you might be able to spend some daily time in solitude. Schedule it just as you would an appointment. Then schedule a time where you can spend 4-6 hours alone. If possible, schedule several days where you can get away for an extended time sometime in the next 6 months.
- Think about where you feel most at peace. Some people like the beach, some like the mountains, some might be able to find it in their own back yard. It is important to note that it is usually very helpful to be out in nature, as long as weather permits. Write out several places where you might be able to spend some solitude time:
- Find a place this week where you can practice solitude in the midst of your work day. It might be finding a quiet, peaceful spot during the lunch hour. Experiment with this to see how God uses it in your life.

¹ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of The Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 161.

² John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 89-90.

³ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981), 13.

⁴ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline Study Guide* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 45.