

SOLITUDE & SILENCE

October 29, 2023



**CHRIST
CITY
CHURCH**

INTRODUCTION

We designed the content and guided times below for a roughly three-hour communal practice of solitude and silence. You could replicate the experience. But, perhaps even better, you could adjust the time for each practice to fit a Gospel Community meeting.

Rather than a 50-minute and 40-minute practice split by a debrief, you could do something like this:

- Read the “Going Deeper” together (5 mins)
- Solitude Practice (20 mins – 5 mins on each “section”)
- Debrief by simply asking the question, “What is God inviting you into?” and give 5 mins to write responses.
- Silence Practice (20 mins – 3, 7 & 10 mins for each “movement”)
- Final Debrief: return to the question and allow people to clarify and share. (10-15 mins)

Feel free to adapt as needed!

GOING DEEPER

"To be in solitude is to choose to do nothing...All accomplishment is given up. Silence is required to complete solitude, for until we enter quietness, the world still lays hold of us. When we go into solitude and silence, we stop making demands of God. **It is enough that God is God, and we are his.** We learn we have a soul, that this world is 'my Father's world.'"

(Dallas Willard)

Silence & Solitude are simply: the habit of being quiet and within yourself to be with God.

These twin actions of quietness and stillness are "spiritual practices" ways of engaging with and submitting to God. Yet, "Solitude and silence are the most radical of the spiritual disciplines **because they most directly attack that source of human misery and wrongdoing**" (Willard). What is that source? As we said over the last several months and specifically the [previous week](#), the source of our misery and misliving is *the shallow sandiness of living unaware*.

Our lack of awareness of what is going on under the surface, out to the frantic motion and cascading cacophony, keeps us from the depth of being and relating that would have us build lives on a sure and steady foundation (see Matthew 7:24-27). It is this tendency to settle for the surface sandiness that these practices and Jesus confronts.

In the middle of the Sermon on the Mount (I know you thought we were done with that, but just almost so!), Jesus warns, "practicing our righteousness (specifically here, meaning "practices," much like ours today, of relating rightly with God's commands and heart) before other people in order to be *seen* by them...will have no reward from our Father who is in heaven." (Matt. 6:1). Jesus goes on to urge us not to say one thing (i.e., that we are willing to be aware to be present, to go into the depth or relationship with God and others) and do another thing (i.e., be satisfied with what is on the surface, or easily seen) for that is what hypocrites do (6:2,5, 16). Hypocrites are concerned with what is seen rather than what is *secret* (hidden under an actor's portrayal). Instead, Jesus says, whether in service, or prayer, or fasting (which is a lament or mourning what is and yet is not or longing for something more), to do so "in secret. And **your Father who sees in secret** will reward you." (6:4, 6, 18)

Now, what does the Father, who sees in secret, see? Surely, it's not just our right religious actions, our practices, or disciplines, but what the psalmist has recognized that God knows,

O LORD, **you have** searched me and **known me!**

If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me (hiding who I truly am), and the light about me (what's good and true and knowable), be night,' even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as day the day, for darkness is as light to you. For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb...My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being formed in *secret*, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them...I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully set apart for purpose.

Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well.

(Psalm 139:1,11-13, 15-16, 14)

What Jesus invites us into is a genuineness in our relating to God, not a posturing that keeps God at a distance from us, that keeps us engaging in the shallow. Jesus invites us into being fully known, and the reward of being fully known is, as the psalmist found, **a soul content**, satisfied—**fully aware of who and whose and for what it is**. But here is the thing: such depth of intimacy with God, being known by him and knowing what He sees in secret, can be a little intimidating. So we'll ease our way into it by doing what Willard implies and start with solitude, completed by silence.

In this first stretch, we'll spend time *being ourselves with God*. But before you get into the practice, here are a couple of things to note:

First, **your mind will wander**...and that's okay! We are not made to be alone and quiet, at least not for long stretches, and we are especially not conditioned for such things in our day and age! So, solitude and silence will feel strange, like a stretch, and will (for most) be something we must learn to do with practice.

When your mind starts filling with To Do lists, work or family issues, or the latest podcast listened to or show watched, *don't get frustrated; just take a deep breath* and get back to being within yourself with God. Focus on your breath as you pray:

Inhale: *God With Me*, and hold your breath for 3 seconds

Exhale: *I'm With God*, and let your mind sink with your body back into the resting presence.

Second, it's important to acknowledge that we avoid solitude and silence because it is here **the darkest parts of ourselves often come into focus**. If and when you feel the uncomfortable exposure of something hidden from you (or, more likely, something that you're hiding from others or yourself), remember that our Father has always seen in the dark, and, as the psalmist came to know, *it's because 'darkness is as light to You,' that "I awake, and I am still with You."* (Psalm 139:12,18).

Let what is hidden come into the Light of Jesus' ever-living and given-for-you life *without condemnation*, confessing what is already known in the freedom of grace upon grace which is revealed in the person and presence of Jesus.

GUIDED SOLITUDE | Being Yourself With God¹

(50 minutes)

1. Find a Comfortable Position (whether sitting still or walking)
2. Acknowledge that you are here at the invitation of God, who has searched and known you. All spiritual practices are responses, a movement toward the One who has, is, and is ever moving toward us.
3. With God, take note of the following as you move from the surface into the depths of yourself with God, writing down in your journal what you notice about yourself in the still of being present with God:

- a. **BODY (5 mins)** **What is your physical condition lately?** Are you tired, energized, satisfied with your level of health and fitness, eating well or not, caring for health issues, and so on?

Talk with God about these things and listen for His response.

- b. **MIND (10 mins)** **What concerns or questions have occupied your thoughts recently?** How has your mind been working on these questions, and what is the result?

Let your questions sit in silence with God. Don't grasp for answers; just let them settle in the presence of God with you.

- c. **HEART (10 mins)** **What emotions have been most prevalent recently?** What feelings are you living on or pop up most often? What are your persistent longings?

Let your questions sit in silence with God. Don't grasp for answers; just let them settle in the presence of God with you and take note of what happens (emotionally, physically, spiritually).

- d. **SOUL (20 mins)** **What is the condition of your soul these days?** What concerns are weighing on you? What joys or successes are you celebrating? Where do you hurt? Where do you feel whole?

Bring these to God as a child would bring squeals of delight or tears of sadness or frustration to a loving parent. Allow yourself to experience everything you are feeling right now without censoring anything. Speak to God directly about what you are experiencing, recognizing He knows and is with you in this place.

¹ Based on Ruth Haley Barton's, *Invitation to Solitude & Silence*, 136-139.

DEBRIEF # 1 | 25 minutes

“At times, the strength of a spiritual community lies in the love of people who refrain from getting caught in the trap of trying to fix everything for us, who pray for us and allow us the pain of our wilderness, our wants, **so that we may be more deeply grounded in God.**”

(Rosemary Daugherty)

When we listen to others share from solitude and silence, we tend to judge. Maybe not be “judgy” per se, but rather listen to make a judgement for what we are to do with what we hear. We listen for what we think is most important, the main issue, or what is off or wrong so we can help fix our sister or brother. In that way, we listen without **curiosity for what God is asking of the person sharing** but judging how their story and our story or insight overlap. But our inclination to judge how we can help repair the torn-off shutters often precludes the deep work the Spirit is doing with and through the other person. That’s not to say we never help or offer counsel, but only after a lot of listening. Listening to the one sharing, and the One working in them and us. It’s listening to one another with God, and listening for God with one another that marks companionship or friendship as “spiritual.”

“Spiritual friendship is a relationship **devoted to paying attention to the invitations of God** in each person’s life **and supporting** one another in making a **faithful response.**”²

One way to stay aware of the “trap of trying to fix” is to simply ask the question: ***What do you sense God inviting you into through this experience?*** And then asking questions to help each other process and formulate a grounding thought **they** can respond to.

What do you sense God inviting you into through this experience?

² Barton, 141.

GUIDED SILENCE | Being quiet to listen...

(40 minutes)

1. Get into a comfortable spot, but not too comfortable.
2. Read these anchoring words of the Lord as you listen for His still, small voice.

GOD, I'm not trying to rule the roost; I don't want to be king of the mountain. I haven't meddled where I have no business or fantasized grandiose plans. I've kept my feet on the ground. I've cultivated a quiet soul. Like a weaned child content in its mother's arms, my soul is a child content. Wait, Israel, for GOD. Wait with hope. Hope now; hope always! (Psalm 131)

3. **Movement # 1 TURNING OFF THE NOISE (10 Minutes)** | Imagine being released from the weight of your ambitions, from the anxiousness of control, and from the arrogance of busyness. Confess to God that you are not him, and allow your soul to settle into His arms. **Focus your attention on His presence to you and the feelings of being in His presence.**

To help you quiet your heart and mind while keeping your body awake and attentive, take three deep, long breaths, breathing the centering prayer as you inhale and exhale. When your mind starts wandering, repeat the centering prayer to bring you back into silence and stillness.

CENTERING PRAYER | for starting & stilling

Breath In | "*Because you are God...*"

Breathe Out | "*I am free as a child.*"

4. **Movement #2 TUNING THE NOISE TO HIS PRESENCE (10 minutes)** | Reread Psalm 131. Take three deep breaths, breathing the centering prayer, but this time, **allow whatever thoughts or emotions come up, receive them like a child content in its parent's presence. Offer them in curiosity and wonder to your Father**, whether as praise, confession, confusion, or interest, and then listen.
5. **Movement #3 TAKING NOTE OF HIS LEAD (10 minutes)** | Read Psalm 131 for a final time. Take three deep breaths, breathe the centering prayer, **ask your Father where you can go and what you can do in your freedom**, and then listen. Don't try and force an answer; wait. Listen, and *write down what comes to you in the thin silence*.

DEBRIEF # 2 | 20 minutes

“If you want to identify me, ask me not where I live, or what I like to eat, or how I comb my hair, but **ask me what I am living for**, in detail, **ask me what I think is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for.**”

(Thomas Merton)

Faithful spiritual companions and friends have one agenda: the glory of God experienced and displayed in our living whole and holy *into what God knows of us*. While they may have informed ideas and hopes for us and expectations for genuinely right behavior, they encourage and trust us to listen and follow the voice of our Good Shepherd, walking with us as we give ourselves entirely to the life He leads us to live.

What are you living for, and what is keeping you from living fully for it?