

# Silence & Solitude

## REVIEW

The most radical, and many would say, the most difficult of all the practices of Jesus is silence and solitude. A working definition is: intentional time in the quiet to be alone with God, and our own soul. It's the space we make for God to love us, and to transform us into people of love.

There are two dimensions of silence – external and internal. External is when we get away from all the people and noise and stimuli and let our body come to quiet. Internal is when we calm and center our mind on God, we come to a kind of mental and emotional rest in God.

## BEFORE YOU BEGIN

**Identify a time and place that works well for you.**

- **Time:** For most people, first thing in the morning works best. You're rested, fresh, and the day is young. For others, a more optimal time slot is when the kids are napping, on a lunch break, after work, or before you go to bed. Feel free to experiment until you find the right fit for your personality and stage of life.
- **Place:** Find a place that is as quiet and distraction free as possible. A comfortable chair by a window is a favorite for many. Try covering yourself with a blanket to calm your nervous system. Lighting a candle is helpful. Parks or a nature reserve are ideal.

## SET A MODEST GOAL

- **Beginners:** It's better to start small and work your way up. I recommend you start with ten minutes, 3-5 days a week.
- **Intermediate:** If you already practice silence and solitude a few times a week, consider upping it to every day.
- **Advanced:** If you already practice silence and solitude daily, consider upping your time (ideally to 30-60 minutes), or giving your time a new level of focus.

## A few things to remember as you practice:

1. Start where you're at, not where you should be. We grow through small, incremental acts that in time become habits that eventually become character. This happens over years, not days.
2. You can't "succeed" or "fail" at this practice. The goal is simply to show up. Resist the urge to say, "I'm bad at this," or, "This isn't for me," or, "I don't like this." Be patient with the practice, and with yourself.
3. If you're an S on the Meyer's Briggs (more of a doer than a thinker), and sitting still is just death for your personality, you might want to try exercises while doing something with your hands or body, like walking or stretching or even folding laundry, while your mind comes to rest in God.

**Here's a few exercises to practice Silence and Solitude...**

## **Exercise #1: Breathing Prayer**

### **Overview**

In silence and solitude, we attempt to quiet both external noise, and internal noise. But internal noise is by far the hardest to quell. Often, when we come to quiet, our minds run wild, as Henri Nouwen once said, "Like monkeys in a banana tree." In this first exercise, we focus on our breathing to calm our mind, and let it "descend into the heart" in God.

### **1. Remove Distractions.**

Put away your phone and other distractions, settle in and get comfortable. You may want to take a short walk first, or light a candle, or stretch, as a way of easing your soul into a new mode.

### **2. Watch your breathing.**

Sit in an upright, but relaxed position. Close your eyes. Take slow, deep breaths

- Inhale through your nose, exhale through your mouth.
- As you inhale, breathe all the way in until your stomach distends (this fills your brain with clean, clear oxygen).
- As you exhale, shape your lips like you're breathing out through a straw, and push all the air out with your stomach muscles (getting all the carbon dioxide and toxins out of your system).
- Feel the sensations in your body – stress, heart rate, tightness, calmness, pain, lightness, etc. Becoming present in the moment helps us become present in God.
- Just "watch" your breath enter and exit your body. Pay attention to it and nothing else.
- Your mind will seize this opportunity to run wild with thoughts, feelings, memories, to do's, and distractions. That's okay. It's used to constant chatter, not stillness. Don't judge yourself, feel like a failure, or give up. Just let each thought go as quickly as it comes. When you notice your mind start to wander, just re-center with a quick prayer, like, "Father" or "Jesus" or "Peace" or the ancient, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner," and come back to your breathing.
- Let the Spirit generate from deep within you a compassionate heart toward yourself and each thought that you gently release.

### 3. Pray.

This isn't new age, hypnosis, or magic; it's just a way of resting in God's love, being present to God, slowing down to let Jesus set the pace and agenda of our day.

Once you settle into a rhythm, begin to turn each breath into a prayer.

One breath at a time, imagine yourself...

#### **Breathing out**

Anger

Sadness

Anxiety

Despair

Fear

The need to control

Discontentment

#### **And then breathing in its opposite**

Love

Joy

Peace

Hope

Trust

Detachment

Contentment

### 4. Abide.

Before you end this exercise, spend a while just being. Simply sit in loving attention to God's presence.

Watch God watching you in compassionate love. This is the core of all transformation into Christlikeness.

Through resting under God's loving attention toward us by the Spirit, we are transformed.

***As St. John of the Cross once said, "What we need most in order to make progress is to be silent before this great God... for the language God best hears is silent love."***

**Note:** In the beginning, just 2-3 minutes of this is a win, and 10 minutes is a home run. Like many practices, at first you may well feel awkward, or even anxious, but give it time. It will likely come to feel deeply enjoyable.

## Exercise #2: Feeling and Listening Prayer

### Overview

Emotional pain isn't something to avoid or deny. Rather, emotions are a place to meet God and open ourselves up to God in new ways. Emotions are the language of the soul. Often, they are God's way of coming to us with direction or discipline; or they are our way of drawing near to God, meeting God in our aches and pains.

### 1. Remove Distractions.

Put away your phone and other distractions, settle in and get comfortable. You may want to take a short walk first, or light a candle, or stretch, as a way of easing your soul into a new mode.

### 2. Let yourself feel.

What emotions rise to the surface of your heart, big or small? You might feel joy, gratitude, sadness, emptiness, fatigue, worry, guilt and shame, conviction, anger, lust, optimism – any number of positive or negative emotions.

- Don't run away from your "negative" feelings. In God's presence, face each emotion head on, the good, the bad, the ugly. And don't just think about what you are feeling. Rather, let yourself feel each one, deeply.
- Name each emotion and then let it pass through you.

### 3. Pray.

Get it all off your chest. Give whatever you are feeling over to God - the good, the bad, and the ugly. No filter. The point here isn't to be good, but to be honest. Different emotions call for different kinds of prayer.

- If you're happy – celebrate, sing, dance!
- If you're grateful, express your appreciation to God.
- If you're anxious, give your worry over to the Father and ask for his peace in return.
- If you're sitting in unanswered questions about your life or future, hold that tension before God. Verbalize how it feels not to have an answer. Don't force clarity where there is none. Just be patient before God with all that is unclear in your life and unresolved in your heart.

#### **4. Listen.**

The Spirit of God has direct access to your mind and imagination. God is more than able to implant thoughts, images, feelings, and desires into the core of your being.

Now that you're quiet before God, ask God to speak into your life.

Here are a few ideas of what to ask:

Is there anything you want to say to me today?

- Is there anything you want me to do today?
- Is there anyone you want me to bless today? In what way?
- What would be pleasing to you today, Father?
- What lies am I believing? After you wait and listen, ask the follow up question: What is the truth you want to replace that lie with?
- How do you see me, God?
- Sit in questions like these before God, and just see what comes.
- If nothing clear comes to the surface of your mind, simply meditate on a Scripture that speaks of God's compassionate love for you, such as Psalm 23, John 15 or 17, or Ephesians 1.

**5. Close with a prayer of gratitude** and commit your day (or if it's evening, your rest) to God.

### **Exercise #3: Lectio Divina**

#### **Overview**

Lectio Divina (Latin for "spiritual reading") is a way of reading Scripture with the specific aim of hearing God's voice in your life. There are four basic movements (from four Latin words), but it's less of a technique, and more of a heart posture and pace. The basic idea is simply to find a quiet place to read Scripture slowly with your ear open to God's voice through the text. Unlike Bible study, the goal is less to hear what God was saying to the original audience, but to take the next step and hear what God is saying to you.

(Lectio Divina Continued)

### **1. Remove Distractions.**

Put away your phone and other distractions, settle in and get comfortable. You may want to take a short walk first, or light a candle, or stretch, as a way of easing your soul into a new mode.

### **2. Pick a Scripture to read.**

If you're on a Bible reading plan, just open to whatever is next, but pick a short section of Scripture. One chapter at most. If you're not on a reading plan and nothing comes to mind, here's a few recommendations for Scriptures to start with:

- Psalm 23 or 37 or 40
- John 15 or 17
- Galatians 5
- Ephesians 1

### **3. Slowly work through the four movements of Lectio Divina:**

First, come to quiet. Turn your attention and desire over to God. Feel free to rest for a few moments, as you slow your mind down to the pace of the Spirit. Then...

1. **Read/lectio:** Read the passage slowly and pay attention to each line. Take your time. As you move through the text, pay close attention to what “shimmers,” what words and ideas draw your attention in a special way. When your heart is drawn to a word or phrase or idea, pause for a few moments, and let it expand in your mind.
2. **Reflect/mediatio:** After you finish reading the passage, return to the beginning and read it again. On your second time, focus even more on the words or phrases that resonate with your heart, life, or whatever you're wrestling with today. Listen for what God is saying to you through the text.
3. **Respond/oratio:** Talk to God about what you're hearing.
4. **Rest/contemplatio:** Pause to sit in God's presence before you return to the noise of life. Express whatever is in your heart to God—wonder, awe, joy, hope, or gratitude.

Some teachers add a fifth movement: incarnate/incarnatio—where we ask the Spirit to illuminate our mind with a clear action step to incarnate the passage we've been sitting in.

## Exercise #4: Retreat

### Overview

Short, daily times of quiet are key to emotional health and spiritual life. But some things just can't be rushed. Relationship with God takes time to cultivate. Retreat is an exercise in which we set aside a longer time—ideally a day—to rest and meet with God.

#### 1. Set a time and place where you can go away for an extended time of retreat.

- Ideally, give yourself 8 hours away. But again, start where you're at. If all you can do is slip away for 3-4 hours on a Saturday morning, that's a strong beginning.
- Find a spot where you can be alone and uninterrupted. If possible, go away to a cabin, beach house, park, or retreat center.
- Do a little research, most cities have retreat centers or monasteries nearby that are open to the public for a small fee.
- Once you arrive, fully disconnect from all devices, especially your phone.

#### 2. Spend a day alone in the quiet with God.

There's no "right" way to spend the day, but here's a recommended template, if it's helpful

The night before: Wind down after dinner and go to bed early.

**8-9 AM:** If possible, arrange your morning so you can remain in silence from the time you wake up.

Take a walk, do some breathing prayer, practice gratitude, or whatever works best to calm down and prepare your heart to meet with God.

**9-11 AM:** Read and meditate on Scripture. Read slowly, taking plenty of time to stop and reflect when God seems to be speaking to you through the text. Write down what sticks out to you.

**11 AM-12 PM:** Do some unhurried listening prayer. Talk over your notes with God. But spend time calmly waiting for his voice. It will come. Wait until you get his perspective on your life.

**12-1 PM:** Eat lunch and take a walk, reflecting back on the morning, and enjoying the moment.

**1-2 PM:** Take a nap. (can I get an amen?)

**2-3 PM:** Set goals that emerge from the day's reflection and do any necessary calendar planning.

**3-5 PM:** Journal a summary of your day and any action steps as you return to your life. End with gratitude and abiding.

- That said, the above is just a general template, and it's important not to feel any pressure to "produce" an outcome from our retreat. It's great if we come out with vision, clarity, and a short list of next steps, but it's also wonderful to allow God to love you, and, like Psalm 23 has it, restore your soul.