

The Discipline Of Silence

Silence also brings Sabbath to you. It completes solitude, for without it you cannot be alone. Far from being a mere absence, silence allows the reality of God to stand in the midst of your life. God does not ordinarily compete for our attention. In silence we come to attend.

— Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission*

Introduction

Our next Spiritual Discipline is Silence. The Discipline of Silence often brings with it the Spiritual Discipline of Solitude, but this is not always the case. We tend to think of Silence as the absence of sound, but this is too narrow of a definition. Perhaps a better one would be that Silence is the absence of *distracting* sound. This new definition opens up more possibilities for practicing the Discipline. Can you think of some? (Here are mine: in the car, in a busy room with noise canceling headphones, in a room in your home with a white noise generator). Our world is overfilled with noise, and it is fairly rare to find a place of silence in the classic definition of it. So, we just need to get creative and have some fun doing so.

Not Mindfulness

The Spiritual Discipline of Silence is not at all the same thing as practicing Mindfulness, as you would for instance in an MBSR course. Mindfulness is about *emptying*. The Discipline of Silence is about *filling*. It is the Discipline of opening a space to be fully present to God as we listen for His voice. It is a time for us to simply be alone with God. It is not about doing but rather about being. The initiative is not ours. It comes from God alone. Perhaps rather than Silence, we might instead think of it as the Silence of Listening or the Silence of Resting.

Jan Johnson, in her book *When The Soul Listens*, tells a story that illustrates well the practice of the Spiritual Discipline of Silence. She tells it within the context of Contemplative Prayer, but it holds equally well for the practice of the Discipline of Silence:

[W]e are like the old Russian peasant who spent an hour each day sitting in the church. The priest worried that the peasant was wasting time when he could have been working and making money, so he asked the peasant why he did this. The peasant replied, "I look at him. He looks at me. And we tell each other that we love each other." Such an approach assumes God's presence, God's love, and God's desire to be with us and communicate with us.

Start Small

With the Spiritual Discipline of Silence, the same rule that we have seen before applies here as well: *Do what you can, not what you can't*. So how is this Spiritual Discipline even possible for those of us living in the "real world"? We are not monks after all. We live very busy lives with tons of responsibilities. We might have small children at home. We might have demanding jobs. We might have a thousand things to do each and every day of the week. So how can we possibly find time, not to mention silence, to practice this Discipline?

The secret is to start small. How about five minutes? How about three? God is so good about meeting us wherever we are. Get up a few minutes earlier each morning. Turn off the radio if you are driving alone. Practice while you are waiting. It is even possible to do this practice in a crowd, but that requires an understanding of the two types of silence.

Two Types Of Silence

There is external silence, and there is internal silence. The Spiritual Discipline of Silence has far more to do with internal silence than external silence. Ideally, it is best to have both, but it is possible to practice this Discipline in places where there is no external silence.

Internal silence is by far the more difficult one. It involves hushing the almost constant chatter that normally runs through our minds. This takes a lot of practice, but it is both doable and fun. The secret here again is to start small. It is about intention. It is about quieting our mind. It is about not beating ourselves up. It is a lot like learning how to ride a bike.

Strategies

There are a number of strategies for managing internal silence. All involve not actually “managing” it in the way that we typically think of managing something. Rather than fighting the random thoughts that show up uninvited, we simply welcome them and let them go without further notice. Here are some strategies for handling these visitors:

- **Palms Up, Palms Down:** We begin our time of Silence with our palms up indicating a position of receptivity. When an unwanted thought shows up and we become aware of it, we turn our palms down to release it, then turn them back up again to continue.
- **The Small Child:** When we notice that our mind has wandered off, we imagine ourselves going over and gently taking it by the hand and leading it back to where it should be.
- **Clouds:** We visualize the stray thoughts as clouds that are just passing by. They are there for a moment, and then they drift on. We needn’t pay any more attention to them than that.
- **Centering Word, Phrase, Image:** This one comes from Centering Prayer but is equally helpful with the Spiritual Discipline of Silence. Prior to our time of Silence, we settle on a centering word, phrase, or image. When a distracting thought comes into our mind during our time of Silence, we immediately bring to mind our centering word, phrase, or image to get back to where we want to be. An example of a word might be: *Shalom*. An example of a phrase might be: *More of God; Less of Me*. An example of an image might be a candle flickering. The trick is to make sure that our centering word, phrase, or image does not bring new distractions to our mind (and to not get hung up worrying about whether or not we have picked the right centering word, phrase or image)!

- **Wandering, Not Pondering:** It is also important to discern the difference between our minds wandering and our minds pondering. They tend to feel somewhat similar at first, so don't be too quick to dismiss them. Take a moment to notice, and trust your instincts. If the thought is about what you will have for breakfast after you are done, that is obviously wandering. But if the thought is about someone you will be meeting with later in the day, then it is less obvious and could very well be something to ponder. You will know with practice.

Practice

It is time now for us to practice. We will do this in two steps.

First, let's take a few minutes to come up with our strategies. Feel free to discuss this with others if you wish. There is no right answer here. Which one of the strategies seems to resonate with you? That is likely the best one with which to start. If it doesn't work, try something else the next time. What works well for you may not work at all for the person sitting next to you. For example, I have never found the centering word, phrase, or image to work for me because I keep wondering if there is a better centering word, phrase, or image that I should be using.

Second, we will now take some time to practice the Spiritual Discipline of Silence. Let me begin by acknowledging the fact that silence can be profoundly uncomfortable to some people. If that is you, please don't feel pressured to do this practice. If you are going to do the practice, please take a moment to get comfortable in whatever way works for you. If you would like to change where you are sitting, please do so. If you would like to close your eyes, please do so. Practicing Silence with a group of people we know is hard, but our goal today is very simple. All that I want us to do is to be aware of when our mind wanders and practice using our strategies for gently bringing it back. Some days when you are practicing the Spiritual Discipline of Silence, you may well spend the majority of the time doing just this, and that is both very normal and perfectly fine. God meets us where we are. We do what we can, not what we can't.

Reflection Discussion

What thoughts do you have at this point? Does this seem like a Spiritual Discipline that you would be interested in trying? Does the idea of it resonate with you? Do you have any lingering questions? As with the Spiritual Discipline of The Daily Office, I am happy to assist you with this in whatever ways I am able, even after our time together here today is done.