

## The Discipline of Solitude

(Excerpts taken from Richard Foster's Celebration of Discipline)

**Open:** What are your thoughts, feelings, experiences, or questions about the concept of solitude?

### Some Preliminaries

1. Jesus calls us from loneliness to solitude.
  - a. The fear of being left alone petrifies people.
  - b. Our fear of being alone drives us to noise and crowds.
    - i. We keep up a constant stream of words even if they are inane.
    - ii. We buy radios that strap to our wrists or fit over our ears so that, if no one else is around, at least we are not condemned to silence.
2. But loneliness and clatter are not our only alternatives.
  - a. Loneliness is inner emptiness
  - b. Solitude is inner fulfillment.
3. Solitude is more a state of mind and heart than it is a place.
  - a. There is a solitude of the heart than can be maintained at all times.
  - b. Crowds, or the lack of them, have little to do with this inward attentiveness.
  - c. If we possess inward solitude:
    - i. We do not fear being alone, for we know that we are not alone.
    - ii. Neither do we fear being with others, for they do not control us.
4. Inward solitude has outward manifestations.
  - a. Jesus lived in inward "heart solitude," but frequently experienced outward solitude.
    - i. He inaugurated his ministry by spending forty days alone in the desert (Matthew 4:1-11).
    - ii. Before he chose the twelve he spent the entire night alone in the desert hills (Luke 6:12).

5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Life Together*: “Let him who cannot be alone beware of community...Let him who is not in community beware of being alone...Each by itself has profound pitfalls and perils. One who wants fellowship without solitude plunges into the void of words and feelings, and one who seeks solitude without fellowship perishes in the abyss of vanity, self-infatuation, and despair.”

### **Solitude and Silence**

1. Without silence there is no solitude.
  - a. Though silence sometimes involves the absence of speech, it always involves the act of listening.
  - b. Simply to refrain from talking, without a heart listening to God, is not silence.
2. Under the Discipline of silence and solitude we learn when to speak and when to refrain from speaking.
  - a. The person who views the Disciplines as laws will always turn silence into absurdity.
  - b. Thomas a Kempis: “It is easier to be silent altogether than to speak with moderation.”
  - c. Control is the key (cf. Ecclesiastes 3:7).
3. The disciplined person is the person who can do what needs to be done when it needs to be done.
  - a. A person under the Discipline of silence is a person who can say what needs to be said when it needs to be said (cf. Proverbs 25:11).
  - b. If we are silent when we should speak, we are not living in the Discipline of silence.
  - c. If we speak when we should be silent, we again miss the mark.

### **The Sacrifice of Fools**

1. “To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools” (Ecclesiastes 5:1).
  - a. The sacrifice of fools is humanly initiated religious talk (cf. Ecclesiastes 5:2).
  - b. Peter spoke in religious overtones even when no one was speaking to him (Matthew 17:4).
2. One reason we can hardly bear to remain silent is that it makes us feel so helpless.

- a. If we are silent, who will take control?
  - b. God will take control, but we will never let him take control until we trust him.
  - c. Silence is intimately related to trust.
3. One of the fruits of silence is the freedom to let God be our justifier.
    - a. We don't need to straighten others out.
    - b. Perhaps more than anything else, silence brings us to believe that God can care for us—"reputation and all."
  4. The tongue is a thermometer; it gives us our spiritual temperature.
  5. The tongue is also a thermostat; it regulates our spiritual temperature.

### **Steps into Solitude**

1. Take advantage of the "little solitudes" that fill our day.
  - a. Those early morning moments in bed before the family awakens.
  - b. A morning cup of coffee before beginning the work of the day.
  - c. The bumper-to-bumper traffic during the freeway rush hour.
  - d. These tiny snatches of time are often lost to us.
2. Develop a "quiet place" designed for silence and solitude.
  - a. A special corner of a room.
  - b. A special chair.
  - c. A special room.
3. Find places outside the home.
  - a. A spot in a park.
  - b. A church sanctuary.
  - c. A storage closet somewhere.
  - d. A retreat center.
4. Try to live one entire day without words at all.
  - a. Do it not as a law, but as an experiment.
  - b. Note your feelings of helplessness and excessive dependence upon words to communicate.
  - c. Try to find new ways to relate to others that are not dependent upon words.
5. Four times a year withdraw for three to four hours for the purpose of reorienting your life goals.

## **Conclusion**

1. The fruit of solitude is increased sensitivity and compassion for others.
2. There comes a new freedom to be with people.
3. There is a new attentiveness to their needs, a new responsiveness to their hurts.
4. Thomas Merton: "Solitude and silence teach me to love my brothers for what they are, not for what they say."