

Spiritual Disciplines for Quiet Retreat

We live in a very noisy world, surrounded by electronic beeps and hums and all kinds of auditory stimuli. At times, those noises keep us distracted enough to ignore pain, or tension, or imbalance in our life. Coming away to a noise-free environment gives us room, literally to hear better, both our own thoughts and feelings, and the voice of God.

There are two parts to **Silence** as a spiritual discipline:

Outside Silence

To experience silence, first eliminate outside noises – especially man-made ones. You need to turn off your cell-phone, lap-top, radio, alarms, PC, PDA, TV, CD, VCR, DVD and any other acronym-named noisemakers. (Generally, natural sounds, such as wind in the trees, or a babbling stream, do not affect us in the same way, and can actually enhance a quiet retreat experience.) Part of entering into silence is first becoming aware of the noises you live with, and how they affect you, and then stepping away from them. If you are taking a day on your own, plan to go where you know someone will safeguard your silence, and ideally, pray for your retreat (so, don't plan to retreat in your home, or in a public place where people may see you and want to chat.) Plan ahead so that you can turn off your cell phone; (leave an emergency contact who can find you if it's crucial.)

Inside Silence

The second, and harder silence is to quiet the inside voices in your heart and head. This is a habit to be learned, and if it new to you, it may be a struggle at first. Richard Foster, in the little IVP booklet on Meditative Prayer, writes about how hard it is for us in our culture to meditate without falling asleep – because we are a culture that is continually wound up! We are either in motion, or asleep. We don't know how to be alert but relaxed!

As you enter silence, you may find it a delightful surprise; a peaceful, refreshing, restful time in God's presence. And that is the hope. However, you may also find that you are doing battle against tempting or disturbing thoughts, feelings or desires – (common ones are anger, hunger, lust and sleepiness.) You may feel anxious about the list of things you need to do after the retreat. Or you may find you are daydreaming and wandering from your focus.

Don't be hard on yourself. We shouldn't be surprised by how easily we are distracted from prayer. Rather, we should marvel that we ever engage with God! As you seek silence, thank God for the moments when you are able to concentrate. And when you find you are distracted, laugh it off, and come back to focus. Even a few minutes of quiet communion with God today will be more than you would have done if you weren't on retreat. With practice, it will become more natural for you to enter into silence with God.

If you are distracted by a mental list of to-do's – write them down and put it away to look at when you get leave. Ask the Lord to hold the list, so you don't have to worry about it.

If you find that you can't escape a recurring disturbing thought, then stop, and with the Lord's help, take a look at it. What is it about? What are you feeling? Is there a reason this is pressing on your heart now? Ask the Lord what He might want to show you right now about this situation. It may be His agenda for your time, after all. If it is a weakness, a temptation, a regret, a sin, remember that in the grace of Christ, you can come to the Lord without shame or fear, for He knows you and loves you and desires to make the most of your time together.

Solitude

"For God alone, my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from Him." Psalm 62

As you enter into a retreat day with God, even if you are in a group, there is an invitation to the spiritual discipline of Solitude. **Solitude** is a discipline of stepping away from dependency on others, to enter into intimacy with God alone. It is like fasting, only from relationships. Just as food is necessary, friendships are vital to our lives, but sometimes we need to step away, to break free from becoming entangled, choked, or overly enmeshed. Some dependent relationships may be with radio announcers, TV characters, or writers of magazines, books or blogs. You may want to meditate on Scripture, or read a short devotional chapter on your retreat today, but don't let reading become another voice that distracts you from Solitude.

If you are an Extrovert, or an External Processor, you may find Solitude very challenging! But don't limit God by saying, "I can't do this. I'm not that type!" Look for His grace to meet you, just as you are. It is often when we see and acknowledge our weakness that we experience God's gracious provision, and we are drawn closest to God. Ask for help, and see what He will do!

If you are an Introvert, however, true solitude with God is challenging as well! Introverts are able to spend time alone with themselves quite happily, without engaging in communion with the Lord! Just as with silence, the discipline of Solitude improves with practice. Talking about your experience with a Spiritual Director may give you further insights into the most effective use of this discipline in your walk with God. In Solitude, you have the invitation to be as honest as you can be with the Lord who loves you more than you dare to imagine. It is my prayer that you will see new truths about His character that you have not experienced personally before, as you come face to face with your Savior, and the Lover of your soul, in Silence and Solitude today.