

Practicing Silence

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When God appeared to Elijah after his suicidal depression and flight from Jezebel, He told him to stand and wait for the presence of the Lord to pass by. But God did not appear in ways he had in the past. He was not in the wind (as with Job), an earthquake (as in Mount Sinai and the Ten Commandments), or fire (as in the burning bush with Moses). As we read in 1 Kings 19:12, God finally revealed Himself to Elijah in “a sound of sheer silence.” The English translation of God coming “in a still, small voice” does not capture the original Hebrew intent, but what could the translators do? How do you hear silence!?

Dallas Willard calls *silence* and *solitude* the two most radical disciplines of the Christian life. Similarly, Henri Nouwen wrote that “without solitude it is almost impossible to live a spiritual life.” In solitude, we separate ourselves from people and things in order to attend to God. In stillness, we quiet every inner and outer voice to listen for God’s “sheer silence.”

Silence and solitude are probably the most challenging and least experienced disciplines among Christians today. We live in a world of noise and distractions. Most of us fear silence. As we’ve experienced in many of our own church services, studies confirm that the average group can only bear fifteen seconds of silence.

And yet, in Psam 37:7a, Scripture commands us to “be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him.” It also calls us to “be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10a). Though it’s a struggle, waiting for God in the midst of silence ushers us into His restful presence. For Elijah and for us, the silence after chaos abounds with the presence of God. He spoke to Elijah out of the silence and He also speaks to us.

Practical Guidelines:

Most teachers of Centering Prayer suggest daily times of silence before the Lord for 20 minutes. I find that beginning the practice with 2-10 minutes once a day is often a great start. Give yourself lots of grace as you enter into this very new spiritual practice.

- * Find a place where you can sit still and uninterrupted.
- * Sit straight.
- * Breathe slowly, deeply, and naturally. Offer yourself to God; let go of your cares and worries.
- * Close your eyes or lower them to the ground.
- * Allow yourself to sink into God’s loving presence.
- * When you find yourself distracted, gently return to the Lord.

Dealing with Distractions:

The following have been helpful to me as my mind wanders:

1. When you find your mind wandering, let your breathing bring you back. As you breathe in, ask God to fill you with the Holy Spirit. As you breathe out, exhale all that is sinful, false, and not of Him.
2. I sometimes pray the Jesus Prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.” This invites us to remember what our short, earthly lives are ultimately about.
3. The third tool I often use is to remember and meditate on my union/oneness with Jesus as my spouse. I am hugging Him and allowing myself to be hugged. No words are exchanged. We simply embrace.
4. I love to pray the Lord’s Prayer each day. When my mind wanders with distractions, I simply return to “Abba, Father” to reconnect me with Jesus. It also reminds me of my purpose in the stillness – I quiet myself to connect with Him.
5. You may want to download the CD “Silence” onto your ipod. You can choose a 5-10-15 or 20 minute time frame for silence and not have to look at your watch. It begins and ends with a minute of music.

Without expectation of results or revelation, we simply offer our time to be with God in stillness. We *choose* to make space for God. He is already present and waiting. Trust the Spirit to guide you into this practice and take you into deeper intimacy with God in stillness. Just remember that you do not need to do anything to capture God’s attention or love. You do not even need to speak. Simply be with God in love.