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An Introduction to Solitude

Practical wisdom on giving God our undivided attention

Matthew 6:6

Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life. Solitude begins with a time and place for God, and him alone. If we really believe not only that God exists, but also that he is actively present in our lives— healing, teaching, and guiding—we need to set aside a time and space to give him our undivided attention.

Overcoming Obstacles

To bring some solitude into our lives is one of the most necessary, but also most difficult, disciplines. Even though we may have a deep desire for real solitude, we also experience a certain apprehension as we approach that solitary place and time. As soon as we are alone—without people to talk with, books to read, TV to watch, or phone calls to make—an inner chaos opens up in us. This chaos can be so disturbing and so confusing that we can hardly wait to get busy again.

Entering a private room and shutting the door, therefore, does not mean that we immediately shut out all our inner doubts, anxieties, fears, bad memories, unresolved conflicts, angry feelings, and impulsive desires. On the contrary, when we have removed our outer distractions, we often find that our inner distractions manifest themselves to us in full force. We often use the outer distractions to shield ourselves from the interior noises. It is thus not surprising that we have a difficult time being alone. The confrontation with our inner conflicts can be too painful for us to endure.

This makes the discipline of solitude all the more important. Solitude is not a spontaneous response to an occupied and preoccupied life. There are too many reasons not to be alone. Therefore we must begin by carefully planning some solitude. Five or ten minutes a day may be all we can tolerate. Perhaps we are ready for an hour every day, an afternoon every week, a day every month, or a week every year. The amount of time will vary for each person according to temperament, age, job, lifestyle, and maturity.

But we do not take the spiritual life seriously if we do not set aside some time to be with God and listen to him. We may have to write it in black and white in our daily calendar so that nobody else can take away this period of time. Then we will be able to say to our friends, neighbors, students, customers, clients, or patients, “I’m sorry, but I’ve already made an appointment at that time and it can’t be changed.”

Producing Fruit

Once we have committed ourselves to spending time in solitude, we develop an attentiveness to God’s voice in us. In the beginning—during the first days, weeks, or even months—we may have the feeling that we are simply wasting our time. Time in solitude may at first seem little more than a time in which we are bombarded by thousands of thoughts and feelings that emerge from hidden areas of our mind. One of the early Christian writers describes the first stage of solitary prayer as the experience of a man who, after years of living with open doors, suddenly decides to shut them. The visitors who used to come and enter his home start pounding on his doors, wondering why they are not allowed to enter. Only when they realize that they are not welcome do they gradually stop coming.

It is clear that what matters is faithfulness to the discipline. In the beginning, solitude seems so contrary to our desires that we are constantly tempted to run away from it. (One way of running away is daydreaming or simply falling asleep.) But when we stick to our discipline, in the conviction that God is with us even when we do not yet hear him, we slowly discover that we do not want to miss our time alone with God. Although we do not experience much satisfaction in our solitude, we realize that a day without solitude is less “spiritual” than a day with it.

Intuitively, we know that it is important to spend time in solitude. We even start looking forward to this strange period of uselessness. This desire for solitude is often the first sign of prayer, the first indication that the presence of God’s Spirit no longer remains unnoticed. As we empty ourselves of our many worries, we come to know not only with our mind, but also with our heart, that we never were really alone—that God’s Spirit was with us all along.

In solitude, we come to know the Spirit who has already been given to us. The pains and struggles we encounter in our solitude thus become the way to hope, because our hope is not based on something that will happen after our sufferings are over, but on the real presence of God's healing Spirit in the midst of these sufferings. The discipline of solitude allows us gradually to come in touch with this hopeful presence of God in our lives, and allows us also to taste even now the beginnings of the joy and peace which belong to the new heaven and the new earth.

The discipline of solitude, as I have described it here, is one of the most powerful disciplines in developing a prayerful life. It is a simple, though not easy, way to free us from the slavery of our occupations and preoccupations and to begin to hear the voice that makes all things new.

Practical Suggestions

Let me give a more concrete description of how the discipline of solitude may be practiced. It is a great advantage to have a room, or a corner of a room, reserved for the discipline of solitude. Such a "ready" place helps us set our hearts on the kingdom without time-consuming preparations. The important thing is that the place of solitude remain a simple, uncluttered place. There we dwell in the presence of the Lord. Our temptation is to do something useful: to read something stimulating, to think about something interesting, or to experience something unusual. But our moment of solitude is precisely a moment in which we want to be in the presence of our Lord with empty hands—naked, vulnerable, useless, and without much to show, prove, or defend. That is how we slowly learn to listen to God's small voice.

But what to do with our many distractions? Should we fight these distractions and hope that thus we will become more attentive to God's voice? This does not seem the way to come to prayer. Creating an empty space where we can listen to God's Spirit is not easy when we are putting all our energy into fighting distractions. By fighting distractions in such a direct way, we end up paying more attention to them than they deserve.

We have, however, the words of Scripture to which to pay attention. A psalm, a parable, a biblical story, a saying of Jesus, or a word of Paul, Peter, James, Jude, or John can help us to focus our attention on God's presence. Thus we deprive those "many other things" of their power over us. When we place words from the Scriptures in the center of our solitude—whether a short expression, a few sentences, or a longer text—they can function as the point to which we return when we have wandered off in different directions. They form a safe anchoring place in a stormy sea.

This is only one specific form in which the discipline of solitude may be practiced. Endless variations are possible. Walks in nature, the repetition of short prayers, singing—these and many other elements can become a helpful part of the discipline of solitude. But we have to decide which particular form of this discipline best fits us, to which we can remain faithful.

It is better to have a daily practice of ten minutes solitude than to have a whole hour once in a while. Simplicity and regularity are the best guides in finding our way. They allow us to make the discipline of solitude as much a part of our daily lives as eating and sleeping. When that happens, our noisy worries will slowly lose their power over us, and the renewing activity of God's Spirit will slowly make its presence known.

Although the discipline of solitude asks us to set aside time and space, what finally matters is that our hearts become like quiet cells where God can dwell, wherever we go and whatever we do. The more we train ourselves to spend time with God, and him alone, the more we will discover that God is with us at all times and in all places. Then we will be able to recognize him even in the midst of a busy and active life. Once the solitude of time and space has become a solitude of the heart, we will never have to leave that solitude. We will be able to live the spiritual life in any place and any time.

Thus the discipline of solitude enables us to live active lives in the world while remaining always in the presence of the living God.

—HENRI NOUWEN; excerpted from our sister publication LEADERSHIP Journal, © 1981 Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit LeadershipJournal.net.

Discuss

1. Do you agree that it is often difficult to spend time in solitude, even when you have set aside a time and place to do so?
2. What are some ways to deal with the mental distractions that often occur in solitude?
3. What would you need to do in order to consistently spend 10 or 15 minutes in solitude every day?