

Silence and Solitude

OVERVIEW

It comes as no surprise that our world has grown more comfortable (obsessed, some may say) with the idol of instant gratification. How often do we find ourselves caught in the tyranny of the urgent, frustrated by the slow loading speed of our Instagram feeds or that text message that didn't go through or how long it took to wait in line for dinner. In fact, we've grown so accustomed to everything being instant – from commercial-less television to instant, one-stop online shopping with one-day shipping – that it has become an (almost unchallenged) metric for improvement. Instant anything is its best form.

But there's a problem: We are actually not made for the instant life. In Psalm 115:8, the psalmist claims that people who make idols will become like them, as will everyone who trusts in these idols. An unbridled instant culture can only form and produce people who feel unworthy, alone, angry, anxious, and used.

Rather than being formed into the image of our instant culture, followers of Jesus seek to be re-formed into the image of God (Col 3:10), in whose image we were created from the beginning (Gen 1:27). The spiritual life (or, life with the Spirit of God) is about slowing down to the pace of abiding. This week we want to practice slowing down, pausing our instant lives and spend some time abiding in silence and solitude, which helps us avoid the trappings of being formed by and in an instant culture. As we've talked about in the Silence & Solitude Practice, being alone, still, and quiet before God is how followers of Jesus stay emotionally alive and spiritually awake.

WITH THIS IN MIND, HERE IS THE PRACTICE

1. Identify a time and place that works well for you.

Time: For most people, first thing in the morning works best. You're rested, fresh, and the day is young. For others, a more optimal time slot is when kids are napping in

the late morning, or on a lunch break, after work, or before you go to bed. Feel free to experiment until you find the right fit.

Place: Find a place that is quiet and as distraction free as possible. A comfortable chair with a blanket and candle nearby works well for a lot of people. Weather permitting, a park or nature reserve are also a good bet.

2. Set a modest goal.

Beginners: It's better to start small and work your way up. We recommend you start with ten minutes, 3-5 days a week.

Intermediate: If you already practice silence and solitude a few times a week, consider upping it to every day.

Advanced: If you already practice silence and solitude daily, consider upping your time (to, say, an hour), or just giving your time a high level of focus.

3. Put away your phone or any other distractions, settle into your time and place, and get comfortable.

For most people, sitting with your back straight, shoulders relaxed, legs on the floor is a good start. Others do better lying on their back in a relaxed position.

Some of you may prefer to do this exercise while walking or doing something simple with your hands, like laundry or drawing.

4. Begin with a breathing prayer.

Close your eyes.

Take long, deep, slow breaths (if you want, count 4 seconds in, 4 seconds wait, 4 seconds out, repeat). Inhale through your nose, exhale through your mouth.

Start to pay attention to your breathing. Just “watch” your breath go in and out.

Release the constant chatter in your mind. Let each thought go as quickly as it comes, and just focus on your breathing.

Your mind will seize this opportunity to run wild with thoughts, feelings, memories, to do's, and distractions. That's okay. Don't judge yourself, feel bad, give up, or worry. When you notice your mind start to wander, just recenter with a quick prayer, like, “Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me” or “Holy Spirit, center me” or even just “Father” and come back to your breathing.

In the beginning, just 1-2 minutes of this is a huge win, and 10 minutes is a home run.

5. Spend a few minutes "abiding in the vine."

Transition from your breathing prayer to “the practice of the presence of God.”

Notice God's presence all around you and in you. For some people it's helpful to imagine the Father is sitting in the chair across from you or on a throne.

Welcome his love, joy, and peace from the Holy Spirit.

If you want, open your mind and imagination to listen for God's voice, or get something off your chest in prayer.

But the main goal here is simply to “be with Jesus.” Don't feel like you have to “do” anything. Just relax and enjoy his presence.

6. Close in a prayer of gratitude and commit the rest of your day to the Father. A few things to note:

By living in an instant culture, we are infused with narratives about the connection between productivity and worth. So it can be good to remember that feelings of

anger, anxiety, or shame are to be expected when you're starting out spending time in silence and solitude. In response to these feelings, Henri Nouwen writes: "These feelings, strong as they may be, are not telling me the truth about myself. The truth, even though I cannot feel it right now, is that I am the chosen child of God, precious in God's eyes, called the beloved from all eternity, and held safe in an everlasting embrace."

You can't "succeed" or "fail" at this Practice. All you can do is show up. Be patient. This takes some people years to master. Resist the urge to say, "I'm bad at this" or "This isn't for me." Don't judge yourself, especially if you're an overachiever type.

If you're more of an "S" on the Meyer's Briggs, and sitting still is just death, you might want to try this while doing a stretching exercise or going on a walk somewhere quiet and distraction free (like a park or short hike). Apply the same idea to a walking prayer, and just focus on your walking instead of your breathing.