

# The Practice of Silence and Solitude

a sermon in the series

The Apprentice: An Analysis of What it Means to be a Disciple

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Matthew 14:23

*And when He had sent the multitudes away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. Now when evening came, He was alone there.*

It has been my task in these messages on discipleship to show us the way of a true disciple of Jesus. I have prayed that the Lord of salvation would make it obvious to you whether or not you are His disciple. Only true disciples are Christians. This is the teaching of all of Scripture and of Jesus.

What then is the definition of a disciple? It is a person who has surrendered his life to following Jesus so that he may be like Jesus. He or she is the apprentice of Christ so that they can learn of Him and be more and more like Him. That is a disciple.

In the last message of this series, which I preached on June 29, I showed you that if we are to be Jesus' disciples it is necessary that we live as He lived. We have already established the fact that we can live like Christ. We will never be deity but in His human nature we can live like Jesus. In fact, the Bible commands it and God will settle for nothing less. And, as Jesus' disciples, we have to adopt His lifestyle, which means we practice the same spiritual disciplines that our Lord practiced.

Although Christ did not have the corruption of human nature that we do, He saw the need to practice the hard work of establishing godly habits. How do you think you will be an obedient disciple, who does have remaining corruption, if you do not work to develop the same godly habits of Jesus? It is through these godly habits, which we call spiritual disciplines, that we develop the same kind of routine and godly habits that Jesus had.

## **I. What Are Spiritual Disciplines?**

What are spiritual disciplines? They are adding to your life godly habits, positive things that Jesus did. But they are also actions to deprive the desires of our bodies and minds that are reminiscent of our old life before Christ so that we can control them and not be controlled by them. I am talking about the appetites you had and the kinds of things you did before you became a child

of God. We have to deprive ourselves of those routines, those ungodly habits, and the way you do that varies. Some things you stopped doing when you were converted. You ceased sexual immorality and drunkenness. You may have struggled and you may even struggle to this day with certain temptations but you don't practice those things. But in addition, there are some good things that you must also abstain from time to time in order to live as Jesus lived and to bring your body under submission.

Paul said in I Corinthians 9, "I beat my body and bring it into submission, to make it my slave, so when I preach to others I don't myself become disqualified." Paul is teaching us, and so is Christ by example, that you cannot let your body rule and dominate your Spirit. You have to bring the bodily appetites and the desires of the mind into control in order to use them for the purposes of God rather than to be led astray by these desires and appetites.

How do you do that? How do you bring your natural appetites for acceptance, approval, sex, food, and rest, into submission? Sometimes you do it by just saying "no" to those appetites. For example, fasting. Fasting is telling your body it cannot eat or have food anytime it wants but you're going to dictate when it will eat and when it will not eat. You pull away from the table and you say, "I am the master. The Spirit of God is in me, I am in Him, and you will do as I say." That's how you bring your body into submission—by denying it. This is an example of bringing that bodily appetite into submission of the Spirit that is in you. If you satisfy every bodily appetite when you have the urge, even with good things, you will not be able to live like Jesus.

Paul tells husbands and wives concerning their sexual relationship with one another that it's good to abstain for a brief time to give themselves over to prayer. Sex is a beautiful gift that God has given husband and wife and yet when that good thing controls the relationship, you are not walking according to the will of God.

In addition, there are other spiritual disciplines that have nothing to do with abstinence, but just the opposite. As we said a few moments ago, you add to your life godly habits. You do certain things that are godly on a routine basis in order to establish them as habits. For example, prayer is a spiritual discipline and it should be done daily. How do you do that? Well, you start by scheduling a regular time of prayer and just like the word *practice* suggests, you practice praying until you develop a godly habit of praying routinely. Bible study is another spiritual discipline you add to your life and practice until it becomes a godly habit.

## **II. Our Difficulty With Spiritual Disciplines**

I understand we have an aversion to the word *discipline*. It usually means to us doing something you don't want to do. It's like a child hearing his parent say, "Eat your spinach because it's good for you," when the child can't stand the taste of spinach.

Donald Whitney in his wonderful book, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, which, if I may say, you ought to secure a copy and read it more than once, begins the first chapter trying to help

his readers to overcome this bad image of the word *discipline*. He tells of a 6-year-old boy, whose parents enrolled him in music lessons. After school every afternoon, he has to practice his guitar while watching his friends play in the park across the street. Whitney says that is, “discipline without direction.” And we would all agree that it’s torture to a 6-year-old boy to have to stay home and practice the guitar while his friends are playing.

But Whitney now asks the reader to imagine the boy is visited by an angel one afternoon during guitar practice. The angel gives the boy a vision of a professional guitarist playing in Carnegie Hall. Well, of course the little boy is astonished by what he sees and hears. The musician delights the audience as well the boy with his amazing ability to move his hands in perfect rhythm and produce the kind of sound only a practiced guitarist could do with that instrument.

To say the least the boy is overcome with delight and desire. He had never heard the guitar played in that way. It was extraordinary.

The angel asks the boy what he thinks about the vision. He answers like any young boy would, “Wow!”

Then the angel tells the mesmerized child that the amazing guitarist was him in a few years. With that the angel points to the small guitar in the boy’s hands and says, “But you must practice!”

The point is made. The boy’s attitude toward practice is changed because of the vision. He now has seen what practice will do for him. His discipline has a purpose, direction, and a goal. No longer will his practice be torture. He remembers what he saw each afternoon after school and the vision of the future calls him into purposeful action.

Our problem with spiritual disciplines is exactly the same. We see prayer, fasting, solitude, sacrifice as drudgery because it’s, as Whitney says, “discipline without direction.” We have no purpose, except the proverbial cliché of the parent coaxing their child to eat spinach, “It’s good for you.”

The purpose of spiritual disciplines is to be like Jesus. It is to be able to bless the person who cursed you, pray for the person who lied about you, and do good to the guy who took credit for what you did. Spiritual disciplines are about becoming Christ-like by not answering your accusers and remaining silent, refusing to justify, or clear your name. That kind of life does not come automatically. Here is one of the greatest problems with Christians and sanctification—we assume it will come automatically. But it doesn’t. We wrongly assume that because God has promised to sanctify us. Thus, we conclude that it will just happen and one day we’ll wake up and be spiritually mature. But it doesn’t work like that. Oh yes, He’s promised grace, but the Bible also says it takes work and effort, on my part, practicing those disciplines until you don’t need them anymore, because it has become a natural way of life.

Spiritual disciplines are doing what is necessary to be like Jesus. The practice of these disciplines is a rejection of the idea that spiritual maturity is something that happens automatically.

An illustration of spiritual disciplines I received from Brother Gary Ecklekamp during our week of prayer in January. He shared one evening about the spiritual discipline of fasting. He said fasting was like unplugging from the world so you could plug into Jesus. I love that word picture. Fasting is a spiritual discipline where you unplug your flesh from the world so you can plug into Jesus. Let me tell you, every spiritual discipline is unplugging your life from the power source and influence of the world so you can receive the influence and power of God. Before you were converted your flesh knew only one way to be satisfied—outside of the will of God. It did what you wanted to do. Your appetites and desires controlled you. You knew which one you could get by with and which ones you couldn't and some of you were willing to do things you knew would have terrible consequences because you were so under their control.

To be like Jesus is to unplug yourself from the world and now plug into a new power source—the Holy Spirit. But one of the problems is that our flesh is like an adapter that will not fit into Jesus' receptacle. You try to plug your flesh into the power of the Holy Spirit and see what happens. It will not work. Let me see if I can illustrate this.

When traveling internationally you must make sure you have the appropriate adapters for electronic devices because, unlike most Americans think, not everyone has two-pronged reciprocals like us. Most of your electronic devices come with a power cord that has two flat prongs but when you go to a different country they won't work because that's a US cord. You have to have an adapter that will fit your cord so you can plug into their power source. Before we went to Zambia, Africa, we discovered they didn't use any of the adapters we had, they used a plug that has three prongs, all of which are flat and angled different ways. While we were in Zambia we were OK, we had the adapters and could plug into the wall, but when we left Zambia to fly back home we landed in Johannesburg, South Africa, and began using our devices. About an hour before boarding our flight to Germany we went to look for a reciprocal to recharge our computers and phones and discovered they use a three-prong adapter but they're not flat, they're all round, so we couldn't plug in.

Spiritual disciplines are the adapters that allow you to plug into the power of the Spirit of God. You can't just plug in the flesh and its desires for this and that right into the Spirit, you have to have the right adapter. It's these spiritual disciplines that work like an adapter so you can plug into God and receive His influence and help.

Because Jesus practiced these disciplines, so must we. That's why the Apostle Paul says in Romans 6:11-13 to "reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God."

That's what I am to do. It is this reigning in our bodies that will aid us in our becoming like Jesus.

### **III. Jesus Practiced Silence and Solitude**

*“And when He had sent the multitudes away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. Now when evening came, He was alone there.” (Matthew 14:23)*

Jesus didn't get alone just to pray. He also got alone so He could practice silence and solitude.

*“He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, And as a sheep before its shearers is silent, So He opened not His mouth.” (Isaiah 53:7)*

Even though He preached to thousands, Jesus refused to call attention to Himself. Several times the Gospels say that Jesus did not respond to His questioners or challengers, even people who were in need. An example of this is the Syrophenician woman whose daughter was possessed with the devil. The mother kept yelling at Jesus to answer her prayers and heal her daughter but the Bible says, “Jesus answered her not a word.” This went on for quite a while and He remained silent. Sometimes He wouldn't talk to the person crying out to Him. This is quite a different perspective on Jesus, isn't it? Sometimes He just remained silent.

You shouldn't be shocked. How many times have you accused God of doing the same to you when you pray? Sometimes He doesn't say anything.

## **A. The Discipline of Silence.**

Jesus was not the gregarious preacher with always a story or joke to tell and, like Jesus, we must also practice the silence of not speaking.

*“So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath;” (James 1:19)*

Someone has done the math—you should listen twice as much as you speak because Jesus gave you two ears and only one mouth. But that math isn't right. For some of us, even though we may speak only half as much as we listen, we still speak too much.

*“If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless.” (James 1:26)*

I'm going to make a startling statement and I want to make sure you're all listening. James is saying that God ties your salvation to your mouth. If anybody thinks he is religious, thinks he is a Christian, and doesn't keep a muzzle on his mouth, but just says whatever comes to his mind is a deceived person and his religion is absolutely useless. That is a very hard statement.

It frightens us to think that somehow our relationship with God is somehow tied to this thing called the mouth, but James says it is. A person given to a lot of talk needs to be careful, more so than the man or woman who doesn't talk a lot. Some of us are naturally made to talk a lot while

others are made to be quiet and reserved. The Bible isn't talking just about your normal, natural temperaments, but something much more profound.

## **I. Why is watching the tongue so important?**

*“In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, But he who restrains his lips is wise.” (Proverbs 10:19)*

The more you open your mouth and talk, the more possibility of sinning. “In a multitude of words sin is not lacking.” A person who talks a lot is probably sinning quite a bit because the more you talk the more chances now you have to participate in sharing things you ought not to share—gossip—and the more opportunity to enter into idle conversation—the kind that has no spiritual value and does not bless the person listening. The more you speak the greater the temptation to speak in ways that expose what is bottled on the inside, opening the floodgate of the heart, out of which comes all kinds of sin.

Why is watching the tongue so important? James answers further,

*“Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! <sup>6</sup> And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell.” (James 3:5-6)*

Why watch the tongue? Because this little tongue can cause a whole lot of damage.

*“You are snared by the words of your mouth; You are taken by the words of your mouth.” (Proverbs 6:2)*

You are literally trapped, enslaved, caught, tortured, and in bondage by this mouth. Not necessarily by the devil but by your own words.

How many times have you said something and no more had those words left your mouth and you said, “Oh, I wish I had not said that.” It happened to me yesterday while I was preparing this message of all days. A pastor friend called me, to whom I hadn't spoken since before we left for Africa. We talked for a few moments and I asked him a question about something I assumed he already knew and found out he didn't already know, but of course wanted to find out what I was talking about. The problem was, I was talking about another brother who had a difficulty, and at that moment I realized that if the brother who had the difficulty wanted our mutual friend to know he should have told him and not me. This tongue snares us so often and it can happen before you know it.

That's why the spiritually mature exercises self-control.



## **2. Spiritual maturity requires self-control. And if a man or woman can control their tongue, then all other questionable uses of the body can be controlled.**

*“For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect (mature) man, able also to bridle the whole body.” (James 3:2)*

If you can control this tongue, you can control every other body part. It's the tongue that is the most difficult to bridle. Even James says you can bridle a horse but we have trouble to bit and bridle the tongue. A spiritual man or woman is a person who has learned to put a guard over their mouths. They don't talk a lot, and are not usually great conversationalists because of it.

*“He who has knowledge spares his words, And a man of understanding is of a calm spirit.” (Proverbs 17:27)*

You would think if a man knows a lot he would have a lot to say, when in reality a man who knows a lot knows he can't just spew at the mouth and it not eventually come back to hurt him. The more he learns the more he knows there are some people you can't tell things, there are people who aren't ready to hear, and they're not open to it.

*“Even a fool is counted wise when he holds his peace; When he shuts his lips, he is considered perceptive.” (Proverbs 17:28)*

## **3. Why do we like to talk so much?**

Dallas Willard in his book, *Spiritual Disciplines*, asks the question, “Why do we insist on talking as much as we do? We run off at the mouth because we are inwardly uneasy about what others think of us. Eberhard Arnold observes: ‘People who love one another can be silent together.’ But when we're with those we feel less than secure with, we use words to ‘adjust’ our appearance and elicit their approval.”

The reason some people like to talk a lot is not just their temperament but because they're trying to win people over and impress them. They try to impress others with what they know and usually what they know is about someone else and that's called *idle gossip*.

There are some of you who are natural sanguines, meaning you have the personality type that is the life of the party. You are always talking, and people like to listen to you, it's a wonderful thing—people actually like to listen to you. I usually speak and nobody wants to hear. They want me to get done as quickly as possible. But you who have that temperament, that personality, that gift, and I would say to you, be very careful. Most people with that personality type are trying to win people to themselves to be accepted and loved.

There is another reason you should practice silence.

#### **4. Freedom from noise.**

We live in a noise-polluted world. There are just some people who love noise and hate silence so much that the first thing they do when they get up in the morning is turn on the TV or the radio or music. When they first get home they do the same. Why? Because to be quiet and have silence is frightening. I'm going to speak about why in just a few moments, but if you want to grow in God you've got to get away from the noise. You must get to a quiet place.

One of the reasons I get up so early is because it's the only time of the day that is peaceable and quiet. About seven o'clock this road becomes a major thoroughfare. The people who live south come this way to go to work and it's not quiet. I've got to get up before the traffic just to have silence where I can quiet my own soul before God, just like Jesus did. Jesus not only practiced silence but solitude, that's why He would get away by Himself.

#### **B. The Discipline of Solitude.**

*“And when He had sent the multitudes away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. Now when evening came, He was alone there.” (Matthew 14:23)*

Either God or we become silent. Either we get alone and get quiet so we can hear God, or God will get quiet and we will not hear Him.

Why did Jesus get away by Himself? So He could hear God. So should we all the more.

### **IV. Why We Resist Silence and Solitude**

#### **A. The Flesh Loves Stimulation.**

Your flesh, which is not evil it's just who we are, our human nature, likes to be stimulated. That's why we like televisions and computers and electronic devices and music and food, it's stimulation to us. We were made to be stimulated but the problem is we're over-stimulated. When silence becomes frightening to you, you are over-stimulated. If you can't be quiet and alone by yourself for any length of time, your flesh is ruling you.

This is why solitary confinement is used as either punishment or torture. There is something that screams within us, *Don't exclude me. Don't shut me off. Don't put me away where I won't be stimulated.* We love stimulation.

Did you know you can put a newborn baby in isolation and even if you feed him or her with proper nourishment, but never touch the baby, it will die? Our body needs stimulation. We need it. One of the reasons massage therapy has become so popular over the last few years is because there is truth to the fact that these bodies need stimulation in order for proper circulation and health. But listen, just because I need some stimulation doesn't mean I need to be overloaded or should become dependent upon it.



## **B. The Sense of Aloneness is Frightening.**

Solitude disconnects us from the world. When you purposefully get alone and quiet that disconnects, unplugs you from the world. But since most of us gain a sense of significance mostly from what we do and our relationships, solitude increases our sense of insignificance.

What I mean by that is that some of you, especially guys, get your feelings of worth and significance from what you do. Lose the ability to do your job for a while and see how significant you feel. You will wrestle with this. Every man does. If a man goes into retirement or can no longer work, he has to wrestle with this issue and questions like, *Who am I? What is my purpose?* because he gets personal significance from what he does.

Women, you get personal significance mainly from your significant relationships. Become separated from those relationships and you wrestle with those same questions, *Who am I? What is my purpose?* That's what solitude reveals.

Solitude exposes insecurities.

Have you ever been alone at night, with no one within shouting distance? Did you get a little twinge of fear? The reason you do is because safety is in society. There is safety when there are a bunch of us together. We're like animals that herd or flock together, but when we're isolated from the herd we're on our own to protect ourselves and that's a little frightening.

But these are the very reasons why we need solitude and silence. By disconnecting and exposing our insecurities and insignificance, solitude reveals our idols.

That's why you need to get alone. This is why I get away at least once a year to fast and pray where I am away from everybody. But the very moment Karen drops me off and drives away there is an immediate sense of fear, of loneliness, and I already miss her. Why? Because she's significant to me. And if I'm not careful, she becomes more important to me than my Savior and that alone exposes when I am too attached to her. Solitude exposes all things I draw significance from other than Christ.

Jesus didn't have to get alone for that reason, but you and I do. Solitude and silence will expose your heart to the things on which you put too much emphasis because they become the objects of your worship. How can you build your life on Jesus when you're building it on something else? Most of you don't even know what those things are; you don't know your idols because they're a part of the noise. They're a part of the routine and everyday life. It's normal to you. But when you get alone, and you don't have to be alone very long, God will begin to show where you are actually placing worship.

## **C. Noise and Society is a Refuge From the Holiness of God.**

Silence and solitude are tools God uses to expose the noise of our hearts. Therefore, we avoid silence and solitude because we do not want to be confronted with God's holiness.

The holiness of God is frightening. You never get so close to God that His holiness is not frightening. Case in point, the Lord Jesus appeared to the Apostle John when John was exiled on the Island of Patmos. John's reaction was to fall before Jesus as a dead man. He was so afraid. Why? Because He saw Jesus in all of His glory and saw that he, John, wasn't holy. Any time you experience the presence of God, if it's really God, you will experience the sense of His holiness.

I've told you of my conversion experience almost 28 years ago now. I was telling God He couldn't save me, He was too just for that, I needed to suffer for my sins and then He spoke to me. He made me understand the Gospel and what Jesus did on the cross, then He began to show me His love and with that love came the sense of the holiness of God so strong and powerful that I tried to hide from it. I literally tried to hide from the holy presence of God. For the next hour wave after wave of love came upon me. I had never wept like that before because I had never experienced love like that before. But also I had never experienced holiness like that before.

Here is the problem with American Christianity, among other things: we see a God who is so like us that He is not holy like the Bible says. We have confused the love of God with a human kind of sentimentality, this syrupy emotion. God does love us, that morning when He saved me He was expressing not His judgment and wrath against me but His love, but in the experience of His love I experienced holiness because His love is holy.

Jesus died on the cross because I was unholy and my sins could not be in the presence of this holy God. Therefore, a holy Sacrifice was sent upon whom God placed all of my wretched and miserable sin. He slew Him in my place so now I can come into the presence of holy God. Never separate the love of God from His holiness because His love is holy. It's what motivated Him to send His Son.

Today man has tried to remake God in his own image. We want our God to be a buddy, a cool dude who is more like us than is different from us. For example, the other day Bobby sent me a picture text from some public place where there was literature on the table. I don't know if it was a coffee shop or what, but it was a picture of a book, *Coffee With Jesus*. I had never seen such a thing so I got on the Internet and found out what it was. It's basically a book of comic strips with Jesus in a coffee shop drinking coffee with supposed Christians and an agnostic. The Savior is sitting there in a suit and tie with long hair and beard, drinking coffee. The purpose of the publisher was to make fun of the hypocrisy of Christians today. There is a lot of hypocrisy today. There is a lot of tradition in the way we approach Christ that is totally contrary to the New Covenant, I understand. But this is not the way to make that statement.

For example, one guy in the comic strip is named Carl. He's at the table in the coffee shop with Jesus and he said, "Jesus, Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven. Right, J-man?" That's how he referred to Jesus—J-man.

The supposed Jesus in the cartoon strip answers back, "Right again, Carl. And let me guess, God is your co-pilot and your boss is a Jewish carpenter?"

Carl responds, "Man, I share something with you and why do you have to be so sarcastic and mock me? Where is the love, Jesus?"

To which this supposed Jesus answers, "Still love you, Carl, but if your grownup son kept talking like a two-year-old well into his forties don't you think you'd want to smack him around a little?"

I only bring this out as an example of what is going on. We want Jesus to be more like us than holy. We want to be able to relate to Him, we say, as we would relate to a friend.

Jesus is a friend that sticks closer than a brother and He said to His disciples hours before His arrest, "I no longer call you servants, but I call you friends," but He is not this kind of a friend that you can chum up with. He's not the kind of friend or buddy or companion or colleague that you can treat in a disrespectful way. He's not the kind of Jesus you can casually sip coffee with and call J-man. He is holy! That doesn't mean you can't get up in the morning and have a cup of coffee as you have time with the Lord; I do that every morning and I often will speak to Him as a child speaking to his Father, but we must never speak to Him in a way that forgets He is holy. He is the One who made us. Our breath is in His hands, and we will stand before Him as He judges the living and the dead.

I am very familiar with Him and I realize I cannot take Him haphazardly. He is holy. So holy that He hates my sin. He put His Son on the cross for those sins and He tortured Him until He died under the wrath my sins deserved. He indeed loves but He is indeed holy. I don't just waltz into His presence lackadaisical, que sera sera, as if I'm walking into your home or your presence. I'm walking into the presence of Almighty God, who deserves my brokenness before Him.

The mark of religion today is the idea that God is chummy rather than holy. I can tell when the Spirit of God is really at work. There will always be a sense of the holy. When I'm in other churches I know whether or not God is really worshipped there by the sense of holiness in the place. When God shows up, I don't care how loving He is, there is always a sense of His holiness and that has an element of holy fear. There is a sense when God moves in a place that people are so caught up with who He is and that He's holy that we dare not open our mouths. That doesn't mean we have to be silent when God is in our presence, sometimes He'll cause you to run and leap and dance and sing, but that is always done with the acknowledgement that He is holy, altogether different from us.

And when a move of God is actually upon a people, a congregation, or crowd, there will always be this sense of, "He is God and I'm not. I owe my allegiance to Him." That's why we are afraid of solitude because when we're alone, there is nothing but quiet between you and this holy God. You're standing there with no radio to turn on, no TV to distract you, you know you are standing in the presence of God and the idols are exposed. That's disconcerting to say the least. It will

shake you to your core. I want you to know that you can enjoy the presence of God while having a holy reverence for it Him. One of the ways that happens is by getting alone with Him and making silence and solitude a regular part of your life.

Get quiet. Make sure your environment is quiet. Have regular quiet communion with this God who is holy but loves you very much. Amen.