Silence and Solitude

Lord, I do not fix my eyes on health or sickness, wealth or poverty, success or failure, a long life or a short one. I know that everything has the potential of calling out of me a more loving response to your eternal life in me. Let my one desire, my single choice be this: to want and to choose what better leads to your kingdom taking root in me.

A. The Purpose

1. Silence

   a. “The work of silence is the work of gently saying no to the endless stream of thoughts and feelings that make up our world in order to listen for and say yes to the thoughts and feelings that are the voice of God.”

   b. “Silence is fasting from speaking to listen to God. Solitude is fasting from fellowship with others to be alone with God.”

   c. “We find complete silence shocking because it leaves the impression that nothing is happening.”

   d. “Only silence will allow us life-transforming concentration upon God.”

   e. “Silence is the way to make solitude a reality.”

   f. “Without silence there is no solitude. Though silence sometimes involves the absence of speech, it always involves the act of listening. Simply to refrain from talking, without a heart listening to God, is not silence.”

   g. “If we are silent when we should speak, we are not living in the Discipline of silence. If we speak when we should be silent, we again miss the mark.”

   h. “We are so accustomed to relying upon words to manage and control others. If we are silent, who will take control? God will take control, but we will never let him take control until we trust him. Silence is intimately related to trust...Silence is one of the

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59 Mulholland, R. p. 136
60 Willard, D. p. 163
61 Ibid. p. 164
62 Ibid. p. 163
63 Foster, R. p. 97
64 Ibid. p. 98
deepest Disciplines of the Spirit simply because it puts the stopper on all self-
justification.”

2. Solitude
   a. “Of all the disciplines of abstinence, solitude is generally the most fundamental in the
   beginning of the spiritual life.”
   b. “There is the freedom to be alone, not in order to be away from people but in order
to hear the divine Whisper better.”
   c. “The longing for solitude is the longing for God. It is the longing to experience union
with God unmediated by the ways we typically try to relate to God. By ‘unmediated’ I
mean a direct experience of God with nothing in between: an encounter with God
that is not mediated by words, by theological constructs, by religious activity, by my
own or other’s manipulations of my relationship with God. It is the practice that
spiritual seekers down through the ages have used to experience intimacy with God
rather than just talking about it.”
   d. “One of the most important lessons I have learned over the past few years is how
important it is to have time and space for being with what’s real in my life— to
celebrate the joys, grieve the losses, shed my tears, sit with the questions, feel my
anger, attend to my loneliness. This ‘being with what is’ is not the same thing as
problem solving or fixing, because not everything can be fixed or solved. Rather, it
means allowing God to be with me in that place and waiting for him to do what is
needed. In silence my soul waits for you and you alone, O God. From you alone
comes my salvation.”
   e. A Place for the Soul to Come Out
      1) “But it’s tricky to get the soul to come out, as Parker Palmer so eloquently
acknowledges. We are not very safe for ourselves, because our internal
experience involves continual critique and judgment, and the tender soul
does not want to risk it. Unfortunately, a lot of our religious activity is very
noisy as well; oftentimes we’re just an organized group of people crashing

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Foster, R. p. 100
Willard, D. p. 162
Foster, R. p. 96
Barton, R. loc. 361
Ibid. loc. 477
through the woods together, making so much noise that there’s not a soul in sight.”  

f. “...solitude is the most radical of the disciplines for life in the spirit. In penal institutions, solitary confinement is used to break the strongest of wills. It is capable of this because it excludes interactions with others upon which fallen human personality completely depends. The life alienated from God collapses when deprived of its support from the sin-laden world. But the life in tune with God is actually nurtured by time spent alone.”  

g. “It is solitude and solitude alone that opens the possibility of a radical relationship to God that can withstand all external events up to and beyond death.”  

h. “Today sustained withdrawal from society into solitude seems to indicate weakness, suffering, flight, or failure rather than great strength, joy, and effectiveness. Believing that, we, for instance, thoroughly misunderstand the context of Jesus’ temptations after his baptism (Matt. 4). The Spirit, we are told, led him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Was this not to put Jesus in the weakness possible position before Satan, starving and alone in the wilds? Most to whom I have spoken about this matter are shocked at the suggestion that the ‘wilderness’, the place of solitude and deprivation, was actually the place of strength and strengthening for our Lord and that the Spirit led him there-as he would lead us there-to ensure that Christ was in the best possible condition for the trial...In that desert solitude, Jesus fasted for more than a month. Then, and not before, Satan was allowed to approach him with his glittering proposals of bread, notoriety, and power. Only then was Jesus at the height of his strength. The desert was his fortress, his place of power. Throughout his life he sought the solitary place as an indirect submission of his own body to righteousness (e.g. Mark 1:35, 3:13, 6:31,46) That is, he sought it not as an activity done for its own sake, but one done to give him power for good. All of those who followed Jesus know of his practice of solitude, and it was greatly imitated in the centuries after his death.”

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70 Barton, R. loc. 384
71 Willard, D. p. 101
72 Ibid. p. 101
73 Ibid. p. 102
i. “You don’t... approach solitude with the expectation that you will come away with some deep spiritual insight. It’s not about what you’re going to do; it’s about what you’re not going to do. In solitude you rest.”

j. “To remain healthy, our souls need solitude with no agenda, no distractions, no noise. If someone asks you what you did in your ‘time apart,’ the correct response should be, ‘Nothing.’ Doing nothing does wonders for the soul.”

k. “Jesus calls us from loneliness to solitude.”

l. “The fruit of solitude is increased sensitivity and compassion for others. There comes a new freedom to be with people. There is new attentiveness to their needs, new responsiveness to their hurts. Thomas Merton observes, ‘It is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers. The more solitary I am the more affection I have for them...Solitude and silence teach me to love my brothers for what they are, not for what they say.’

3. A Caution

a. “Let him who cannot be alone beware of community.... Let him who is not in community beware of being alone.... Each by itself has profound pitfalls and perils. One who wants fellowship without solitude plunges into the void of words and feelings, and one who seeks solitude without fellowship perishes in the abyss of vanity, self-infatuation, and despair.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer

b. “We must seek out the recreating stillness of solitude if we want to be with others meaningfully. We must seek the fellowship and accountability of others if we want to be alone safely.”

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74 Ortberg, J. p. 137
75 Ibid. p. 140
76 Foster, R. p. 96
77 Ibid. p. 108
78 Foster, R. p. 96
79 Ibid. p. 96
B. Biblical Foundations

1. Ps. 46:10 “Be still and know that I am God.”
   a. Be still and know that I am God
   b. Be still and know
   c. Be still
   d. Be

2. “I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with his mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me.”
   a. “This is a striking picture of my relationship with my soul. How do you wean a child? You do it by strategic disappointment. You deliberately withhold from the child what she wants so the child learns she can be master and not slave of her appetites.”

3. Is. 30:15 “This is what the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel, says: ‘Only in returning to me and resting in me will you be saved. In quietness and confidence is your strength. But you would have none of it.” NAS

4. Eccl. 3:7 “A time to be quiet and a time to speak.”

5. Jesus
   a. Matt. 4:1-11 Christ was led of the Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days
   b. Luke 6:12 “One day soon afterward Jesus went up on a mountain to pray, and he prayed to God all night.”
   c. Matt. 14:13 “As soon as Jesus heard the news, he left in a boat to a remote area to be alone.” (The news of John the Baptist’s death)

6. Paul
   a. “A short while later, he fled to the Arabian desert for a lengthy period of time, not ‘consulting with flesh and blood’ (Gal. 1:16-17). In the desert isolation of the Sinaitic peninsula he continued the interchange with his Lord until he was ready to return to Damascus, to Jerusalem, and finally to his hometown of Tarsus in Asia Minor.”
   
   b. “Paul’s effectiveness is simply inconceivable without its extensive use of fasting, solitude, and prayer.”

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80 Ortberg, J. 163
81 Willard, D. p. 103
82 Ibid. p. 103
C. The Practice

1. “One of the best ways to begin practicing solitude is to notice the times when silence occurs naturally in our day. Even those of us who are incredibly busy have moments when we are alone, when nothing is happening. Usually we ignore these moments or find ways to fill them. Instead, we can appreciate these times and savor them. We can use these times to turn inward and attend to our feelings.”

2. “What are some steps into solitude? The first thing we can do is to take advantage of the ‘little solitudes’ that fill our day. Consider the solitude of those early morning moments in bed before the family awakens. Think of the solitude of a morning cup of coffee before beginning the work of the day. There is the solitude of bumper-to-bumper traffic during the freeway rush hour. There can be little moments of rest and refreshment when we turn a corner and see a flower or a tree. Instead of vocal prayer before a meal consider inviting everyone to join into a few moments of gathered silence. Once while driving a carload of chattering children and adults, I exclaimed, ‘Let’s play a game and see if everyone can be absolutely quiet until we reach the airport’ (about five minutes away). It worked, blessedly so. Find new joy and meaning in the little walk from the subway to your apartment. Slip outside just before bed and taste the silent night.”

3. “We can find or develop a ‘quiet place’ designed for silence and solitude.”

D. As Prayer

1. Centering Prayer
   a. Prayer designed to keep us centered on God’s presence
   b. Apophatic Prayer
      1) Apo – other
      2) Phatic – to speak
      3) Knowing God without speaking
   c. “One thing you must realize about the practice of apophatic prayer is that you cannot quiet your mind. Don’t even try. Give up; it is a hopeless cause. There is

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83 Wolpert, D. p. 32
84 Foster, R. p. 105
85 Ibid. p. 105
nothing to do but wait within the nothingness of the prayer’s external silence. And then something happens; ‘finally there will come a moment when he [the one praying] experiences such peace and repose in that darkness that he thinks surely it must be God himself’ (The Cloud of Unknowing, 138). God shows up. Not because of anything you have done. Not because of your own efforts. Not because you have figured it out or done it right but because God’s promises are true and because God seeks you out and desires to transform your heart and mind into the likeness of Christ.\textsuperscript{86}

d. “At this point you may be wondering, What is the point of this prayer? You do nothing, you know nothing, and you disregard even positive experiences! In fact, I was once asked at a retreat, ‘What is the purpose of silent prayer?’ To which I replied, ‘There is no purpose.’ From our perspective as people who are always trying to achieve something, there is no purpose to this practice. The point is simply to place ourselves at the mercy of God and allow ourselves to be filled with the grace of our Creator.”\textsuperscript{87}

e. Practical instructions for apophatic prayer

1) Choose a word or phrase as a point of focus
   a. Jesus, peace, hope, I love you, Come Holy Spirit
   b. The Jesus Prayer
      i. Jesus Christ, have mercy on me

2) Each time you realize your mind has drifted, call your attention back to the word of phrase.

3) Each time you call your attention back to him is an act of worship

2. “Prayer is the outgrowth of both silence and solitude. In silence we let go of our manipulative control. In solitude we face up to what we are in the depths of our being. Prayer then becomes the offering of who we are to God: the giving of that broken, unclean, grasping, manipulative self to God for the word of God’s grace in our lives.”\textsuperscript{88}

\textsuperscript{86} Wolpert, D. p. 70
\textsuperscript{87} ibid. p. 70
\textsuperscript{88} Mulholland, R. p. 140