

Title: **The Book of Mark: Part 4, Silence and Solitude**

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Passage: Mark 1:35-45

Big Idea: Spiritual and emotional vitality require that we practice silence and solitude



We live in a world that bombards us with incessant visual and auditory stimuli and noise. It is very easy to become addicted to this noise and overloaded with it without even realizing it.

Our 'so called' time saving electronics like smart phones, high-speed internet access, and faster computers relentlessly remind us that we can or should get more done in less time so we have more time to get even more done. As a result we are addicted not only to *noise*, but to its cousin, *hurry*.

Hurry is not just a disordered schedule. Hurry is a disordered heart.¹ (John Ortberg)

Ortberg illustrates this idea with this story about tattoo the basset hound.



Some time ago, a newspaper in Tacoma, Washington, carried the story of Tattoo the basset hound. Tattoo didn't intend to go for an evening run, but when his owner shut his leash in the car door and took off for a drive with Tattoo still outside the vehicle, he had no choice.

Motorcycle officer Terry Filbert noticed a passing vehicle with something dragging behind it, "the basset hound picking them up and putting them down as fast as he could." He chased the car to a stop, and Tattoo was rescued, but not before the dog had reached a speed of 20-25 miles per hour, rolling over several times.

We often live like Tattoo, our days mark by picking them up and putting them down as fast as we can.

Hurry and noise and incessant busyness are enemies of a healthy spiritual life. I can attest to that. It sneaks up on you. After a vacation that was truly a rest for me I'm more calm, less rushed, less racing thoughts, more truly present for people, but doggin it, a few weeks or even a few days later, I seem to fall back into that same hurry rut I was in before I went on vacation.

God does not want us to be controlled by, nor to conform to, this noisy, hurried life that our culture pushes us toward.

[Romans 12.2](#), "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world"

Today I want unpack a concept that is key to spiritual health related to how we can avoid these noisy and hurried patterns that can lead to a superficial lifestyle. It is based on one verse in the section of Mark we will look at today.

The events in Jesus life leading to what Mark records in verses 35-45 are:

1. Teaching in the city of Capernaum with authority in the synagogue which amazed the listeners.
2. Casting out a demon from a man who was in the audience.
3. Healing the mother-in-law of Simon, one of the four fisherman Jesus had called to follow Him.
4. And healing a bunch of people who heard about Jesus' miracles and brought their friends and family for Jesus to heal them.

So it had been an extremely busy day for Jesus. Sometimes after those busy days and late nights, you just need to sleep in a bit the next day.

¹ John Ortberg, *Life Always Wanted*, p 84

Not Jesus.

Here's what He did:

Mark 1:35, "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed."

He actually got up early. Why?

Because the people there were clamoring for Jesus only to get from Him physical healing and that was very taxing on Jesus. So, needing strength to go on, He went to the one who strengthened Him, through time with God, reflection, quietness, silence, and solitude.

This verse about what Jesus did gives us our Big Idea.



BIG IDEA
Spiritual and emotional vitality require that we practice silence and solitude.



We are going to learn how to more consistently practice and experience silence and solitude because those practices are extremely important to experience a vital spiritual life and Jesus modeled them for us.

In the verses that follow Mark's description in verse 35 when Jesus leaves the house to spend time with God, Simon and some others in the house where Jesus was staying wake up and they discover that Jesus is gone. They go looking for him and when they find him they are put out with Jesus.

Jesus tells them that he needs to go to other villages where perhaps people in those villages would be more interested in Him as a person and His message rather than interest in Him just as a healer. So they travel through other villages in Galilee where Jesus preaches, drives out demons, and heals a man with a serious skin disease.

He tells him not to tell anybody about this healing except the temple priest who would verify the healing. He told him not to tell others because He didn't want to be known simply as a miracle worker. But, the guy told, which generated even more crowds clamoring for Jesus to heal them.

So that's a quick summary of Mark 1.35-45. Let's go back to our key verse and go deeper about silence and solitude.

Mark 1:35, “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.”

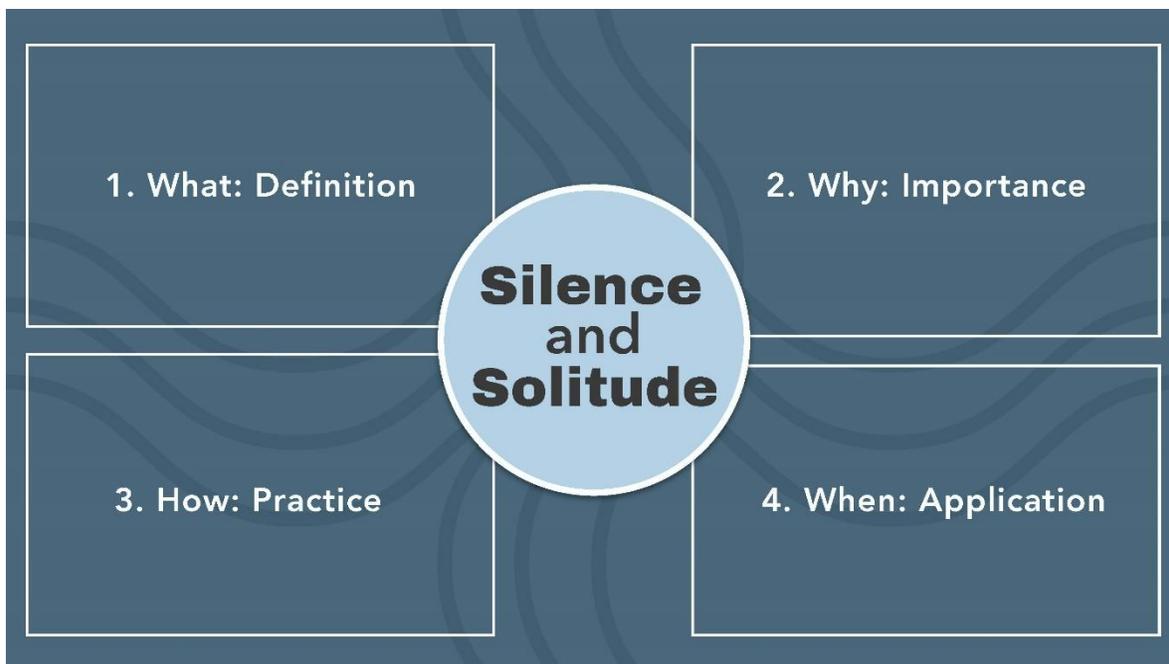
Two spiritual writers who are now with the Lord have written much on this subject.

Without it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life. (Henry Nowen)

[It] is generally the most fundamental in the beginning of the spiritual life, and it must be returned to again and again as that life develops. (Dallas Willard)

Because silence and solitude are related spiritual disciplines, I will use them interchangeably.

We will look at the What, the Why, the How, and the When.



1.What: Definition

Solitude: The practice of temporarily being absent from other people (in isolation or anonymity) and other distractions.

It is not loneliness nor is it getting away from people just because we don't like them. It's more about what we do with our bodies--where we are.

Silence: The practice of voluntarily and temporarily abstaining from speaking.

It's more of what we do with our tongues, what we say.

The purpose of both practices is to develop our soul, to help us be more present with God. They are like a hand in a glove. Without silence, solitude has little effect.

In essence they are practices of NOT doing something--

- not interacting with society and people
- withdrawing from human contact: voice, noise, phone, tv, radio, internet...for a few minutes or few days.

Richard Foster is another writer on the spiritual disciplines and here's what he says.

An elderly woman had been working at prayer with all her might but without ever sensing God's presence. Wisely, her pastor encouraged the old woman to go to her room each day and for 15 minutes knit before the face of God, but to not say one word of prayer. Just knit and try to enjoy the peace of her room.

The woman received the counsel and at first her only thought was, "O how nice. I have 15 minutes during which I can do nothing without being guilty," In time, however, she began to enter the silence created by knitting. Soon, she said, "I perceived that this silence had substance. It was not absence of something but the presence of something. As she continued her daily knitting, she discovered that "at the heart of silence there was He who is all stillness, peace, all poise." (p96 of Prayer, Foster)

She had let go of her tightfisted efforts to enter God's presence and by doing so, discovered God's presence already there.

Silence and solitude are tools God uses to restore our souls by breaking engagements with the world. They are practices that relate to more of a state of heart than a place. Granted, it does include getting away from others, but as you mature you find that you can be in a huge crowd and experience the rejuvenating power of solitude. On the other hand you can become a hermit and never experience the power of solitude.

It can create the ability to carry around with you your own portable sanctuary, a sacred place, a place of rest, connection to God even in a loud, distracting world

Here are a few more powerful quotes on these disciplines.

I have discovered that all the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they are unable to stay quietly in their own room.² (Pascal)

It is a good discipline to wonder in each new situation if people wouldn't be better served by our silence than by our words. (Henri J. M. Nouwen)

It has been said that no great work in literature or in science was ever wrought by a man who did not love solitude.

We may lay it down as an elemental principle of religion, that no large growth in holiness was ever gained by one who did not take time to be often long alone with God.³ (Pastor Austin Phelps, 1820-1890)

Throughout history there have been some unhealthy expressions of this practise. Monkism for example; in the late 18th and 19th centuries wealthy English people would hire hermits. They recognized the value of solitude but weren't willing to endure its rigors. So, they hired these hermits to live in fancy gardens and be silent on their behalf.

A monk newly initiated into his order was told that he'd have to spend the initial 20 years of training in complete silence. He was told that he would only be allowed to say two words every three years. After 3 years of studiously keeping this vow he was summoned before the Abbot and asked if he had anything to say, in two words or less. He replied, "Food bad."

Three more years went by when he was again summoned before the Abbot. "Well, do you have anything to say now," the monk was asked. "Bed hard," was the answer.

After three more years the Abbot found our friend and asked him if he'd like to speak. "I quit!" said the monk. "Well, I'm not surprised," said his Abbot. "You've done nothing but complain since you arrived".

2. Why: Importance

² Willard-Divine Conspiracy-p 358

³ Whitney, spiritual disciplines, p 194

We find many biblical statements and examples on silence and solitude in addition to Jesus' example.

Ecclesiastes 3:7, "There is a time to be silent"

Ecclesiastes 5: 2, "Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few."

Psalms 46:10, "Be still, and know that I am God."

Moses and Paul, some of the most recognized figures in history were transformed in times of extended solitude. Jesus lived in a world of inner solitude and frequently experienced outer solitude. He was busy but was never in a hurry. The key verse we read from Mark reflects that but it was not the only time Jesus practiced silence and solitude:

1. Before he began his public ministry he spent 40 days in the desert in silence and solitude (Luke 4)
2. Before he chose the 12, (Luke 6.12) Jesus spent the night praying to God.
3. When he heard of John the Baptist's death Matthew 14:13 records, "he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place".
4. After feeding 5000 Matthew 14:23 records, "he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone"

Luke 5:16, "But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed."

Silence and solitude were Jesus' places of strength, even the night before his crucifixion he went to a place of silence and solitude, the garden of Gethsemane.

In contrast, the disciples often got caught up into this hurry syndrome and Jesus confronted them. Mark writes...

Mark 6:31, "Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, 'Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.'"

If the likes of Moses, Paul, Jesus, and others practiced this, it is probably a good idea for us to consider solitude and silence as well.

Here is a list of 8 benefits of practicing silence and solitude. I'm treating them as one practice.

1. It breaks the power of hurry.

They break the adrenalin addiction, the "have to" do mentality in life. It creates an inner space for us to become aware of what we are doing and what we are about to do.

2. It can spiritually renew you.

Francis de Sales was a priest in the late 1500's/1600's who developed sign language to teach the hearing impaired about God.

There is no clock, no matter how good it may be, that doesn't need resetting and rewinding twice a day, once in the morning and once in the evening. In addition, at least once a year it must be taken apart to remove the dirt clogging it, straighten out bent parts, and repair those worn out. In like manner, every morning and evening a man who really takes care of the heart must rewind it for God's service . . . Moreover, he must often reflect on his condition in order to reform and improve it. Finally, at least once a year he must take it apart and examine every piece in detail, that is every affection and passion, in order to repair whatever defects there may be.⁴

⁴ p 94 life always wanted

3. It reminds us that life will still go on without us

It interrupts the cycle of constantly having to manage things and be in control. This doesn't mean that we are not needed as a person. Rather it breaks us from a sense of being indispensable.

4. It clears mental distractions for wise decision making.

Jesus took a period of silence and solitude before he made his decision about who among his disciples would become the 12 apostles. He sought the wisdom of His heavenly Father.

5. It creates inner space to hear the quiet voice of God.

God spoke to the prophet Elijah because this prophet had just come from a power encounter on Mt. Carmel with Baal worshippers and he fled because he heard that queen Jezebel had a price on his head.

He hid in a cave and God asked him why he was there. He replied with a whiny response. God then told him to go out to the cave and he would speak to him. A storm came through and wind and earthquake and fire. But God was not in any of those, rather 1 Kings 19.2 says, "And after the fire came a gentle whisper". God spoke in a whisper. Unless we periodically withdraw into solitude we will not hear the gentle whispers of God.

6. It allows us to disconnect from the world and connect with our soul.

Henry Nouwen wrote that, "In solitude, I get rid of my scaffolding." Scaffolding is the stuff we use to keep ourselves propped up.

That scaffolding may be:

- friends
- family
- tv
- job/work
- technology/social media
- achievement
- bank account⁵

Silence and solitude help us disconnect from those things that can prop us up in an unhealthy way.

7. It helps us control our tongues.

James 1:19, "My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry."

Silence and solitude frees us from the tyranny we sometimes hold over others with our words. When we are silent, it is much more difficult to manipulate and control the people around us. Words are the weapons we lay down when we practice silence and solitude. We give up our insistence of being heard and heeded

How does it do that? Silence helps us see that we don't need to say as much as we think we do. I shared a few weeks ago a helpful acronym, called WAIT-why am I talking

8. It helps us with the other disciplines.

Those would include bible reading, fasting, and prayer for when we couple silence and solitude to these disciplines it can enhance them.

⁵ p 92 of *Life Always Wanted*

3. How: Practice

So how can you do it? I hope it will become a regular part of your spiritual growth plan.

1. Plan for it, it won't just happen by itself.

2. Find a quiet place

It could be a closet, an unused room, outside in good weather, or come by the church.

3. Be considerate of others (those who will be affected)

If it is for an extended time, let your family know when and why and ask them to accommodate you. Susanna Wesley was Charles and John Wesley's mom. She had 12 kids. When she needed silence and solitude, she'd sit in a chair and put her apron over her head.

4. Zip it.

James 1:26, "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless."

5. Expect some apprehension.

If this is new to you, you may feel a bit anxious because in general we are uncomfortable with silence. That's why we will unconsciously turn on the radio for background noise.

At first it may seem that you are being bombarded with thousands of thoughts and feelings that emerge from hidden areas of our minds. Ultimately realize, however, that a day with some solitude will be better than a day without it.

6. Length

If this is new, walk before you run. Start with 5-10 minutes and go from there. After a few days maybe your next step is to carve out two hours on a sat morning and then maybe a ½ day and then maybe an overnight retreat.

7. Bring your bible.

Try it this week. Take 3 days, and try it for 5-10 minutes each time.

Bring your bible, a notebook, and spend time in silence and solitude. It may be easier for some than others. Some are more introverted and love doing this. Some are more extroverted and if that is you, it will be a bit harder.

I leave you with this verse that really captures the powerful benefits of silence and solitude.

Isaiah 30:15, "In quietness and confidence is your strength."

Think of a beautiful concerto being played on a piano. Between the notes are rests. However, if you tried to play all the notes at once with no rests all you would get would be noise.

Nobody wants a life filled with just noise. Silence and solitude breaks the power of that noise and gives strength to our souls. I began this message with the example of Jesus getting up early for silence and solitude.

What might happen if every single day you carved out a few minutes of silence/solitude just between you and God? How could that change your days?