

SOLITUDE

DISCIPLINE EQUALS FREEDOM, WEEK 3

I. OUR CALL TO DISCIPLINE

Proverbs 25:28

II. OUR MODEL FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

III. SOLITUDE EXPLAINED

“Solitude is the Spiritual Discipline of voluntarily and temporarily withdrawing to privacy for spiritual purposes. The period of solitude may last only a few minutes or for days....solitude may be sought in order to participate without interruption in other Spiritual Disciplines, or just to be alone with God and think” (Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 225).

“In solitude, we purposefully abstain from interaction with other human beings, denying ourselves companionship and all that comes from our conscious interaction with others. We close ourselves away; we go to the ocean, to the desert, the wilderness, or to the anonymity of the urban crowd. This is not just rest or refreshment from nature, though that too can contribute to our spiritual well-being. Solitude is choosing to be *alone* and to dwell on our experience of isolation from other human beings. Solitude frees us, actually. This above all explains its primacy and priority among the disciplines” (Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines*, 160).

“Solitude is a ‘container discipline’ for the practice of other spiritual disciplines” (Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 128).

“Of all the disciplines of abstinence, solitude 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” (Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines*, 161).

IV. SOLITUDE IN THE BIBLE

Jesus in Solitude

Mark 1:12//Matt 4:1//Luke 4:1-2

Mark 1:35//Luke 4:42

Mark 6:46//Matt 14:23

Luke 5:16//Mark 1:45

Luke 6:12

John 6:15

Jesus in Solitude with a Few Others

Mark 9:2//Matt 17:1//Luke 9:28

Mark 14:32-42//Matt 26:36-46//Luke

22:40-46

Luke 9:18

Jesus Unsuccessful in Seeking Solitude

Mark 6:31-34//Matt 14:13//Luke 9:10

Jesus Teaching Solitude

Matt 6:5-6

Solitude In the Old Testament

1 Kings 19:3-18

Dan 6:10

Lam 3:28

Hab 2:1 (?)

Gen 32:24-30 (?)

Jer 15:17 (?)

V. SOLITUDE IN THE TEACHING OF OTHERS

Advantages of Solitude

“Solitude frees us.... The normal course of day-to-day human interactions locks us into patterns of feeling, thought, and action that are geared to a world set against God. Nothing but solitude can allow the development of a freedom from the ingrained behaviors that hinder our integration into God’s order” (Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines*, 160).

“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” (Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 108).

“As daily sleep and rest refresh the body, so daily silence and solitude refresh the soul. These disciplines have a way of airing out the mind and ironing out the wrinkles of the soul” (Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 244).

“Some are greatly affected from time to time, when in company; but have nothing that bears any manner of proportion to it, in secret, in close meditation, secret prayer, and conversing with God, when alone, and separated from all the world.... A true Christian doubtless delights in religious fellowship, and Christian conversation, and finds much to affect his heart in it: but he also delights at times to retire from all mankind, to converse with God in solitary places. And this also has its peculiar advantages for fixing his heart, and engaging its affections. True religion disposes persons to be much alone in solitary places, for holy meditation and prayer.... It is the nature of true grace, that however it loves Christian society in its place, yet it in a peculiar manner delights in retirement, and secret converse with God” (Jonathan Edwards, cited in Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 247).

Dangers of Solitude

“In solitude we confront our own soul with its obscure forces and conflicts that escape our attention when we are interacting with others. Thus, ‘Solitude is a terrible trial, for it serves to crack open and burst apart the shell of our superficial securities. It opens out to us the unknown abyss that we all carry within us... [and] discloses the fact that these abysses are haunted.’ We can only survive solitude if we cling to Christ there. And yet what we find of him in that solitude enables us to return to society as free persons” (Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines*, 161).

“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, *Life Together*, 77, 78).

Practical Tips for 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.... 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.... What else can we do? We can find or develop a ‘quiet place’ designed for silence and solitude. Homes are being built constantly. Why not insist that a little inner sanctuary be put into the plan, a small place where any family member could go to be alone and silent? ... Let’s find places outside the home: a spot in a park, a church sanctuary that is kept unlocked, even a storage closet somewhere” (Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 105-06).

“Locate special places that can be used for silence and solitude. Find them within the home, within walking distance, within a few minutes’ drive, and within a reasonable distance for overnight or longer retreats.... Perhaps you can find sufficient solitude outdoors” (Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 241).

“Arrange a trade-off system of daily responsibilities with your spouse or a friend when necessary in order to have the freedom for extended times of silence and solitude” (Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 243).

TRAINING PLAN

“But my glory, it doesn’t happen in front of a crowd. It doesn’t happen in a stadium or on a stage. There are no medals handed out. It happens in the darkness of the early morning. **In Solitude.** Where I try. And I try. And I try again. With everything I have, to be the best that I can possibly be. Better than I was yesterday. Better than people thought I could be. Better than I thought I could be. Faster and stronger and smarter. And claim one victory that no one can ever take away from me. Ever. A victory that is earned every single day. A victory of determination and will and discipline. A victory achieved because: I will not stop.” —Jocko Willink, *Discipline Equals Freedom*, 2.

Circle the Level of Engagement You Are Committing to This Week

All four are good choices, and you don’t need to pick the same level every week.

First Steps:

- At least 1 day this week select and practice 1 of the “Spiritual Exercises” listed at the bottom of page 5 of this handout. When you are done, reflect on your experience. How was it challenging? How was it valuable?

Hit Harder:

- At least 2 days this week select and practice 2 of the “Spiritual Exercises” listed at the bottom of page 5 of this handout (1 per day). When you are done, reflect on your experiences. How was it challenging? How was it valuable?
- During this series we will process our experiences in discussion with another person or a small group of people. Sometime this week, meet up with one person discuss your experiences and encourage one another. Consider including people who are not part of our church as well. Use *Discussion Guide #2* below to guide your conversation.

Hard Core:

- At least 3 days this week select and practice 3 of the “Spiritual Exercises” listed at the bottom of page 5 of this handout (1 per day). When you are done, reflect on your experiences. How was it challenging? How was it valuable?
- During this series we will process our experiences in discussion with another person or a small group of people. Sometime this week, meet up with one person discuss your experiences and encourage one another. Consider including people who are not part of our church as well. Use *Discussion Guide #2* below to guide your conversation.
- Practice some kind of deliberate solitude six days this week (taking Sunday off). Experiment with the “hows” and “wheres” of this.

Beast Mode:

- At least 4 days this week select and practice all 4 of the “Spiritual Exercises” listed at the bottom of page 5 of this handout (1 per day). **This includes #4, the half-day retreat.** When you are done, reflect on your experiences. How was it challenging? How was it valuable?
- During this series we will process our experiences in discussion with another person or a small group of people. Sometime this week, meet up with one person discuss your experiences and encourage one another. Consider including people who are not part of our church as well. Use *Discussion Guide #2* below to guide your conversation.
- Practice some kind of deliberate solitude six days this week (taking Sunday off). Experiment with the “hows” and “wheres” of this.
- If you commit to Beast Mode, please email, text, or call me so I know about it and can be praying for you. As time allows I will try to reach out to see how it is going. grhodea@grandgrace.org; 469-250-0825.

READING: SOLITUDE

Adapted from Adele Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, Expanded Edition, 128-31

Desire	To leave people behind and enter into time alone with God
Definition	The practice of solitude involves scheduling enough uninterrupted time in a distraction-free environment that you experience isolation and are alone with God. Solitude is a “container discipline” for the practice of other spiritual disciplines.
Scripture	Mark 1:35; 1 Kings 19:11; Lamentations 3:28
Practice Includes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Giving God time and space that is not in competition with social contact, noise or stimulation • Taking a retreat • Observing Sabbath refreshment by abstaining from constant interaction with others, information and activities • Addressing your addiction to being seen • Communing with God alone while you walk or run by yourself • Practicing disciplines alone: study, prayer, examen, journaling and so forth
God-Given Fruit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freedom from the need to be occupied and stimulated • Moving away from letting the world squeeze you into its mold (Rom 12:2) • Liberation from constantly living your life in reference to other people • Quieting the internal noise so you can better listen to God • Giving yourself time and space to internalize what you already know • Speaking only what you hear from God rather than out of your store of opinions • Including solitude and retreat as part of your lifestyle

On Solitude

Though we may be unfamiliar with the discipline of solitude, most of us recognize it as something we wanted when we were first in love. It didn't matter if the time spent together accomplished anything very useful or important to the world at large. It was simply the way we let our beloved know that he or she mattered. In order to show love, we sought time alone together.

The Song of Songs is a mysteriously wonderful book of the Bible. It gives a glimpse of lovers who want to be alone so they can express the full range of their love for one another. The church regards this book as descriptive of human love as well as of divine love. God longs to commune with his children. He beckons, “Arise, come my darling; my beautiful one, come with me” (Song of Songs 2:13). In solitude the heart waits for God, and God alone. Here the soul opens wide to listen and receive.

Jesus began his ministry with forty formative days of solitude. No doubt Jesus intended to commune with God alone, but he also encountered the tempter in that desert place. Mark writes, “At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan” (Mark 1:12). Solitude is a formative place because it gives God's Spirit time and space to do deep work. When no one is there to watch, judge and interpret what we say, the Spirit often brings us face to face with hidden motives and compulsions. The world of recognition, achievement and applause disappears, and we stand squarely before God without props. In solitude Jesus did battle with the intoxicating possibilities of achieving his kingdom and identity in the power of the self. He faced down the self Satan offered and instead chose his true identity as the beloved Son. Throughout his three years of ministry Jesus returned again and again to solitude, where the rush of attention and the accolades of the crowds could be put in their proper perspective. Solitude with God was a way Jesus remained in touch with his true identity in God.

Most of us can identify with the intoxicating feeling that comes when we are the center of attention. Solitude is a discipline that gets behind those feelings to who we are when we feel invisible and unrecognized. Who are we when productivity and recognition fall away and God is the only one watching us? Some of us simply seem to lose our sense of self when there is no one to mirror back who we are. Without the oxygen of doing and mirror of approval, our feelings of being real and important evaporate. Hollow places open up in our heart, and our soul feels empty and bare. We can feel agitated, scattered and distracted. These disconcerting feelings do two things for us. They reveal how much of our identity is embedded in a false sense of self. And they show us how easy it is to avoid solitude because we dislike being unproductive and unapplauded.

But we need solitude if we intend to unmask the false self and its important-looking image. Alone, without distractions, we put ourselves in a place where God can reveal things to us that we might not notice in the normal preoccupations of life. Solitude opens a space where we can bring our empty and compulsive selves to God. And no matter how well we “do” silence, God is there to accept, receive and love us. God longs for us to be our true self in Christ. He wants us to be who we are meant to be. In solitude we see how little we embrace our true identity in Christ. And we find the truth of who we are in Christ. We are the beloved, and God is pleased with us. This identity is given; it is not earned. Many other voices pull at us, seeking to own and name us, but in solitude we learn what it is to distinguish between the voice of God and the voices of the world. (This is sometimes called the “discernment of spirits” [1 John 4:1].) Times of solitude can be sweet times, but they can also be dark times when God seems to remain withdrawn and silent. We seek the Lord, but he doesn’t seem to show up. These times of testing, or the “dark nights,” like Jesus had in the wilderness, are well documented in the lives of the saints. Don’t be afraid of the darkness or the solitude. Stay with God. The light will eventually dawn.

Spiritual Exercises

1. In a place where you can’t be interrupted, intentionally place yourself in the presence of God. Recognize that the Lord is as near as your own breathing. Inhale God’s breath of life; exhale all that weighs on you. Simply be alone with God. When it is time to return to others, leave the presence of God gently. Carry the sense of being alone with God with you into the next thing.
2. Spend fifteen minutes or more alone with God. You can do an activity if you wish: walk, run, drive, iron. Dedicate the time ahead of you to God. After the time is up, consider how it was for you to be alone with God. Was it hard? Good? Did God speak to you in any way?
3. Make the time you spend in the shower each morning your alone time with God. Present yourself to your Creator—all of your body, all of the dirt that has accumulated in your soul, all that God has made you to be. Let the water from the shower remind you of the water of life that nourishes and changes you. Let the warmth touch you with love. If you like a cold shower, let the bracing impact call you to live your life to the full. Offer yourself to God for the day. Thank him for the alone time he spends with you.
4. Set aside half a day for time alone with God. Go to a retreat center, quiet chapel or park. Don’t stay in your home. Take only your Bible.

Resources on Solitude

Invitation to Solitude and Silence, by Ruth Haley Barton
Surrender to Love, by David Benner

DISCUSSION GUIDE #2: SOLITUDE

Meet together this week with at least one other person to discuss your experiences with solitude. Later in the week would be ideal so you have some time to practice. Meeting in person is best, but over the phone or via video chat would work too.

Before meeting, each person should read pages 2, 4, and 5 in this handout. Alternatively, you could read it together. Underline key parts of these readings and write down any questions you might have.

Questions for Your Group

1. What were your experiences with solitude like this week?
2. Discuss the readings in this handout. What struck you as helpful or challenging?
3. Choose some of these reflection questions to discuss together (from Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 130):
 - a. How and when do you resist or avoid being alone?
 - b. What tends to pop into your mind when you are alone?
 - c. What do you resort to doing when alone?
 - d. What troubles you or makes you antsy about being alone?
 - e. When have you felt most comfortable being alone? Most uncomfortable?
 - f. What sense of God do you have when you are alone?
4. In what ways is the practice of solitude necessary for growth in the spiritual life?
5. How would you like to build deliberate solitude into your life going forward?

Pray for one another as you continue on this journey together!