

Way of Discipleship Small Groups

Balanced life: Solitude and Silence



Touching base (5 minutes)

Open in prayer as is helpful for your group.

If this is your first session take time to introduce yourselves and set any ground rules you want to for your time together.

If you met previously take the opportunity either as a group or in pairs to check in with each other about how your response from last time has gone.



Introduction: Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” St Irenaeus is famous for saying, “The glory of God is the human person fully alive.” We are made for fruitfulness – not just existence - and the fruitfulness God wants to sow in our lives is in things that last forever, in character, in work, in discipling others. But fruitfulness that doesn’t spring from being with God is impossible. We are not gifted, talented, or eternal enough to be fully fruitful in ourselves. Instead, God’s partnership with us as disciples is a life of balance – between being with God and doing; between listening and responding; between being active and stopping, between giving out from what we have first received. These two sessions are about two rhythms in our daily lives and each week which enable this kind of balanced life.

Opening question(s) (5 minutes)

Why is silence important? Why is it difficult?



Understanding the information (30 minutes)

Share these thoughts in your own words or read them together:

While Jesus practised Sabbath, he would also frequently withdraw from people to be with God on His own at other times, and sometimes for extended periods. This was intentional time to be alone with God, and to listen to His Father. Disciples down the centuries have imitated these two practices of solitude and silence, particularly at times of change or challenge, in order to grow in being with God.



Solitude is being apart from others and from “external noise” with the purpose of being with God. It is not seeking “emptiness” which can lead to loneliness. Instead it is time on our own intentionally focussing on God with the aim of leading to being fulfilled by His presence.

Silence is needed for solitude. It is not just “not talking”, but waiting for my internal chatter and thoughts to stop so I can be in a better place to receive what God might want to communicate. Both go together.

As we read the accounts of Jesus it is striking how often He would go to a quiet place to be with His Father – at the beginning of His ministry He spent forty days with His Father in the desert (Matthew 4:1-11). Before choosing his disciples He spent the night alone (Luke 6:12). There is a regular pattern of seeing Jesus withdraw, sometimes with His disciples, when things got busy. Even when huge needs were presenting themselves, perhaps especially then, Jesus would find the place of heart solitude with God. This echoes a strong pattern throughout the Bible of God meeting people in the “wilderness” – a place where they encounter Him in more intense ways. The Greek word for such a place is “eremos” and occurs 48 times in the New Testament! The people of Israel wander in the wilderness, recognising their need for food and water. Moses meets God there in a burning bush and receives God’s name alone on a mountain. The prophet Elijah hears God’s “still, small voice”.

In John 15 Jesus talks about how times of “pruning”, being cut back in our activity, or shaped in our character, are part of God’s work in making us fruitful. Times of solitude and silence are a way in which we “remain in Him”, and in which we can experience being renewed by God, allowing the pain of any pruning experiences we are having to enable new growth in our discipleship.

In solitude we can be strengthened by experiencing the truth that only God matters. In being alone, we can gain a fresh sense of our own limitations once what we do, who we know and what we own is taken away. We are alone with God and ourselves. We are faced with the question of who we are when things that give us significance are not there – and can realize it is only God who is enough. We are faced with the question of who will control things when we are not present – and can realize it is only God who is in control. The purpose of solitude is to be able to see and hear what God wants more clearly. We give God space to communicate with us through His Spirit. We become people who are more likely to give out of what we have first received. Being strengthened like this helps us to be fruitful in that our work and service can spring more fully from God’s leading.

The story is told of two woodsmen. One woodsman challenged the other woodsman to an all-day wood-chopping contest. The challenger worked hard all day long, pausing only for a brief lunch. On the other hand, the challengee took several breaks during the course of the day and also took a leisurely lunch. Well, the end came to the all-day wood chopping contest and the challenger was surprised (and annoyed) to find out that the challengee had cut more wood than he! So, the challenger said, "You cut more wood than I did, even though I worked longer." To which the challengee responded, "What you did not realize is that I was sharpening my axe, every time I sat down to rest."

In solitude the ways in which we are being pruned can become fruitful. In a way, being alone with God can bring us face to face with new challenges. Jacob wrestled with an angel in the desert. It was in the desert that Jesus had a fierce struggle with the temptations He needed to overcome at the start of His ministry. Whether our problems are caused by things that happen to us in the sufferings of life, or by our own inner struggles, solitude offers a place where these things can no longer be ignored, but can be brought to God.

It is also vital for our emotional well-being that we have windows in our lives in which to process difficulties. Peter the disciple knew a lot about being pruned. In silence we can follow His advice by taking the unhurried opportunity to “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” (1 Peter 5:7). We all experience hardship of one kind or another. For Jesus, the key question is can we allow these difficulties to become opportunities for pruning for fruitfulness?

In silence we can express and deepen our trust in God. A 19th century French priest once noticed a peasant come in to the church and stay for hours, kneeling in front of a cross with a representation of Jesus on it. The priest asked this man, “What do you say during all that time before Jesus? The peasant replied, “Nothing. I look at Him and He looks at me.” One way into this silent trust before God can simply be to ask yourself the question, “What do you see when you look at God, looking at you?”

In solitude we can value and love others more. Thomas Merton said that one of the fruits of solitude can be to increase our sensitivity to and compassion for others because “It is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers and sisters...Solitude and silence teach me to love them for what they are, not for what they say.”

Discuss: What are the main challenges to meeting God in solitude and silence for you? What might be the first step to overcoming them?

Reading the Bible (15 minutes)

Read Psalm 131 which describes the experience of being alone with God.

Discuss the Discovery Bible Study questions:
What does this passage teach me about God?
What does this passage teach me about people?
How does this passage call me to obey God?
What might I do in response to this this week?



Seeing how it looks in real lives (10 minutes)

Watch the video at:

<https://youtu.be/9B1Kff4X6Jl>

What struck you as important in the video?



Optional further material and questions

Share these thoughts or read them together:

Jesus commended solitude to His disciples as a normal way of praying: “...when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” Your circumstances and personality will affect the length of time and the way in which you are able to grow in practising this. These thoughts may help:

Knowing God wants to draw near to us. Our desire to withdraw to “be with God” is increased when we connect with how much God wants and promises to be with us. “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.” (James 4:8)

Working towards regular times of being silent before God...it is unlikely that we will develop times of solitude with God unless we have an intentional rhythm

...but also being aware of the season we are in. In John 15 there is a balance between times of being fruitful and times of remaining in God. In our lives it may be hard to regulate what is necessary in a strict way. It may be more a case of becoming aware of the season we are in. Growth cannot occur without remaining in the vine, or pruning. So, for example, if we are aware that we are not seeing much fruitfulness in our lives, it may be a prompt to us that we need to have a season of withdrawing to be with God.

Using the opportunities we already have. While having a special place and time can be helpful, it is possible to find moments of solitude and silence in the normal run of a day. It is better to start as we are than wait until we change circumstances. Driving more slowly, pausing before meals, taking a brief walk, getting up a few minutes earlier, turning off our devices can all offer opportunities within the structure of our existing lives for a moment of silence in which we pay attention to the present moment, knowing that this kind of daily being with God is, as Christian doctor Paul Tournier said, “mostly about waiting for God’s presence.”

Responding to God’s leading (5 minutes)

Give people an opportunity to think about, “What might God be showing me and how might I respond?” They may like to write this down and/or share it with the group and/or share it with one other person. A friendly question is to ask each other, “Is there anything that would be helpful to ask you next time?”



Group prayer (5 minutes)

Spend 5 minutes in silence together, being attentive to God’s presence.





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Additional notes:

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