Focus

We are about to embark on a four-session study of spiritual disciplines and devotional life. However, it seems appropriate to ask ourselves first if there is even any room in our lives for developing the inner life. Few young adults are looking for one more thing to fill their time. Young adults, whether in college or in the beginning of a career, are busy with trying to survive in the academic or business world while juggling the all-consuming developmental task of finding intimacy over isolation. The bottom line is that most college students and young adults starting in careers don’t have room in their lives for cultivating the inner life.

These years are simply a “noisy” time. Too many things compete for the young adult’s attention. For some, the college experience adds another decibel to the noise level: mental overload. Henri Nouwen, in writing about college students, says, “Overstimulated, overexposed, overfed with ideals and slogans, stretched in too many different directions, nothing else can be said than, ‘I don’t care.’”

If we are to help young adults get beyond this apathetic state to a meaningful devotional life, we must first help them find reasons and ways to get away from the overload they experience. We must help a whole generation rediscover the lost art of solitude and silence before God.

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS


COMMENTARY

In this lesson we will look at the spiritual disciplines of solitude and silence in preparation for the next three lessons on devotional life.

Solitude and silence (and fasting) are disciplines of abstinence; whereas disciplines, such as prayer and Bible reading, are disciplines of engagement or activity. Dallas Willard describes solitude as “purposefully abstaining from interaction with other human beings, denying ourselves companionship and all that comes from our conscious interaction with others . . . Solitude is choosing to be alone and to dwell on our experiences of isolation from other human beings.”

How depressing! Why would anyone want to find solitude and silence? At first glance, solitude seems like the last possible topic we would teach to young adults. However, as we look at the biblical teachings on solitude and the benefits it brings, we begin to see that solitude is precisely the prescription we would write for many of the struggles of the young adult years. There are life-transforming results to be had from submitting oneself to this discipline.

Biblical Background

The disciplines of solitude and silence are so foreign to us today that it seems difficult to grasp just how important they were to Jesus and the Early Church. As we focus on key individuals in Scripture, we see God working through their commitment to times of solitude.

John the Baptist

In John the Baptist we see a sustained and determined effort to seek times of solitude in order to know God’s will.
Here was an extraordinary man. He had a clear purpose in all that he did. He was able to face hardship, imprisonment, and even the end of his own vocational goals and popularity because he knew what he was there to do. Where did he develop this single-mindedness and rock-solid sense of God’s plan? We are forced to conclude that, at least in part, it came from his chosen location for ministry—the desert. The desert is not someplace that we would normally be tempted to go, but we see that John ministered in the desert of Judea with such strength that the people went out to where he was (Mark 1:1-8). There, in a place of dependence on God for every need, John was able to develop a sense of calling. A deliberate choice of solitude contributed to the radical impact John had on all who met him.

Jesus

Nowhere is the benefit of solitude more evident than in the life of our Lord. Jesus’ life was a pendulum, swinging back and forth between times of solitude and times of being with others in ministry. Jesus chose solitude before He began His ministry (when He faced temptations in the desert [Matthew 4:1-11]), before choosing the apostles (Luke 6:12-16), between full days of ministry (Mark 1:14-45), and in the Garden of Gethsemane before His trial and death (Matthew 26:36-46). In these times of solitude, He discovered strength, renewal of purpose, and the peace found in submission to His Father’s will. If Jesus needed this kind of solitude, how much more do we!

Paul

The apostle Paul also sought the solitude of the Arabian desert. Concerning the time following his conversion, Paul says, “I did not consult any man, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was” (Galatians 1:17-18). Instead, he spent time in the desert. Not until three years later did he consult with Peter.

Paul, too, emerges from his time of solitude with a sense of purpose and mission that few today have ever experienced. His choice of solitude and the results it produced in his life hint to us today that there is value in taking time away—even from other Christians. Our ultimate dependence on God is established in these one-on-one times with Him.

Historical Background

Solitude and silence were recognized by many of the great Christian devotional writers as necessary disciplines of the Christian life. We will look here at just a few of their calls to solitude.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote much about the need for Christian community. However, he balanced his teachings on community with an earnest plea for solitude. He stressed that both are essential. Bonhoeffer says, “One who...
ognizes something that Jesus and the early Christians knew well. Solitude and silence have the power to break even the most stubborn will. It is in solitude and silence that we as Christians are able to align our will with the Father's and find the power and clarity of mind to be still in the midst of all life throws at us.

Results of Solitude and Silence

1. Freedom. One of the main benefits of solitude and silence is a new kind of freedom. Solitude draws us away from the constant barrage of messages fed to us by today's society. It offers us a chance to sort things out, to decide what is really important. Only in solitude and silence can we find the strength to break out of society's mold. Note how radical the lives of John the Baptist, Jesus, and Paul seemed to those around them. They gained the freedom to be different in their time away from others. They recognized something that Jesus and the early Christians knew well.

2. Perspective. Times of solitude help us to distance ourselves psychologically from the pressures placed on us by friends, family, and society. They clear our head and help us gain needed perspective. One place in particular where solitude gives us new perspective is in the area of motivation for work or ministry. It is easy to fall into the trap of choosing our actions in reaction to the stresses we face. We begin to roll with the punches and let them take us where they will. Solitude allows us to separate ourselves from this cycle, to establish priorities, and to hear what God is calling us to do. Solitude helps us find meaning, purpose, and direction.

In addition, times of solitude also help us in being with others. Because we have time to deal with our own inner worlds, we are much more free to be truly present (not just physically) with others when they need us. The person who has spent time in solitude will have an increased sensitivity and compassion for others.

3. Aid to Other Disciplines. Finally, solitude helps us in other areas of our spiritual development. You will notice in the lives of John the Baptist, Jesus, and Paul, that solitude was never sought just for the sake of being alone. Solitude is usually combined with other disciplines, such as meditation, prayer, fasting, and study. We can try these things without being alone. However, these other disciplines will never so powerfully affect us as when they are accompanied by a solitude and silence of heart and mind that prepares us to hear the voice of God.

The Practice of Solitude

Solitude and silence are hard disciplines to practice. Let's face it. We are more comfortable being with other people than being alone. To be alone leaves us feeling empty and restless. To be in a room with no radio or TV or other mental stimulus is enough to make some of us crazy. It doesn't take long until we begin to see the superficial things in which we have been finding security.

In addition to this, our desire to be alone can be confusing or even painful to friends and family who may not understand.

Finally, solitude is extremely hard to find. It is hard to find in a house or apartment with a family or roommates, and even harder to find in a college dormitory.

How do we start to practice solitude in our overrun lives? Richard Foster and Dallas Willard both have written at length on the topic, but for our purposes here we will look at some simple ways to start.

1. Give God more chances throughout the day to speak. Encourage your young adults to resist the urge to turn on the TV or radio when they enter their apartment or dorm room. Encourage them to take more time just to sit and think in the quiet, to pick up the Bible instead of the telephone. We all need to learn to take advantage of little opportunities we have throughout the day for solitude. Neither you nor your class may have three days to camp in the wilderness, but most of us have five minutes between classes or after lunch when we can just sit on a bench and be with God.

2. Identify a location that is “your place” for solitude and silence. Some people have beaches or mountains nearby to provide solitude, but most of us have to find a place that is not quite so exotic. In college, I found the emergency staircase at the back of the dorm to be a perfect place for solitude. Now I frequent an empty church sanctuary. Wherever you choose, make it a place where you go just to be alone.

3. Take a day away every few months to evaluate and to rethink your life goals. Too often in college and the early stages of a career your young adults are pushed along by the tide into improper decisions simply because they don't take the time to reflect on the decisions they are making. This affects those of us who are farther along in life's journey as well. The busy lifestyle of young adults and the seriousness of the decisions they face both make solitude and silence an absolute necessity, but the need for solitude does not end when we pass those years.

N-SESSION COMMUNITY BUILDING OPTIONS

Select one or more of these activities to begin building bridges between students as you introduce today’s subject.

1. Silent Invasion

Introduce this activity by asking, “How many of you are comfortable in total silence?” Most of us already know that we aren't.

Have your students pair off and sit facing each other. Ask them simply to be quiet and learn all they can about each other just by taking in the other person in silence. This activity will work best if you pair people who do not know each other well. Stress the importance of total silence and avoidance of “sign language” during this exercise.

Allow this experiment to go on for two to three minutes. This will seem like an eternity in total silence.

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Debrief the activity with the following questions:

- What things were you most aware of during this time?
- How did you feel about the experience?
- What things did you learn about the other person in your pair?
- Why are we so uncomfortable with silence?
- What value is there in silence?

2. Did You Hear Something?

A variation of the above activity is to have students sit so that they are not directly facing any other students. If your class is seated in a circle, you can simply have everyone turn his or her chair around, facing the wall. Allow your group to sit in silence for no more than five minutes. Afterward, have each person jot down what thoughts went through his or her mind during this time alone. Ask for several volunteers to share their responses with the class.

3. Noise Notations

Divide your class into small groups. Have each group add up a group total for each of the following for the past week:

- Hours spent with friends
- Hours of TV watched
- Hours of radio listened to
- Number of CDs played
- Number of times your telephone rang
- Number of times each day you checked E-mail
- Hours spent completely alone without stereo, TV, schoolwork, or friends

Discuss the findings from this exercise. Add up class totals for each item by combining group totals. The results most likely show that we live with a lot of noise and very little time to reflect. Ask students to comment on what they see revealed in their answers. Is all this noise a good thing? What value does solitude have in our busy lives?

4. Solitude Survey

Duplication/Transparency Master No. 1 asks your class to identify feelings and attitudes in response to the unfinished sentence, “Spending time with just myself, with no outside distractions, media, or people, is . . .”

Ask your group to be as honest with their evaluation as possible and to circle all appropriate responses on the handout. After they have had a couple of minutes to work on this activity, ask for volunteers to share one of the responses they circled and to explain briefly why they chose that response.

Presentation Options

Select one or more of the following activities to present today’s topic.

1. Lecture/Discussion

Display Duplication/Transparency Master No. 2. It shows a quote by Henry David Thoreau which reads, “We go more constantly and desperately to the post office, but the poor fellow who walks away with the greatest number of letters, proud of his extensive correspondence, has not heard from himself this long while.”

Ask your students what the quote means to them and what application, if any, it has to young adults today. Discuss the following questions, which are printed on Duplication/Transparency Master No. 2:

- How important is it to hear from ourselves?
- What things, besides correspondence, keep people from hearing from themselves these days?
- Is it difficult or fairly easy to find time to yourself? Why?

Present the material from the Commentary, discussing it as you go. You may wish to use individuals from the class to present parts of the material. For example, have one class member study the Biblical Background, one the Historical Background, and one the Contemporary Application.

2. Small-Group Study

Divide your students into three groups. Ask each group to read one of the following passages, each of which describes a time of solitude in the life of Jesus. Afterward, have each group comment on the role that this time of solitude played in Jesus’ life and how that example can be translated into today’s world.

- Matthew 4:1-11
- Mark 1:29-39
- Matthew 26:36-46

Have the groups report back to the class. Discuss whether solitude really did make any difference in Jesus’ life. Supplement the discussion with information from the Commentary.

3. Voices from the Past

Allow three of your students to assume the character roles of three individuals mentioned in the Commentary: One will take on an Old Testament character, one a New Testament character, and one a character from church history. These three actors will each give a short presentation of a time in his or her character’s life when that person spent time in silence and solitude. The results of this time alone should also be highlighted. Your student presenters can select any character from their assigned category they wish. Their level of “acting” will depend entirely on your teaching plan, their creativity, and the preparation time given them.

After the presentations, make two columns on a chalkboard or overhead transparency, one with the heading RESULTS and the other with the heading HINDRANCES. Spend several minutes discussing what results and what hindrances are likely to be discovered as we try to put
times of solitude into our schedules. The Commentary can help guide your discussion at this point.

4. Guest Speaker

Invite a guest speaker to talk to your class about solitude. You may want to consider asking someone from a religious tradition that regularly practices solitude. There may be religious retreat centers, monasteries, or convents nearby where you could contact potential speakers. Having someone in from another tradition may help your students think more objectively about what is being said. Is the discipline of solitude just some strange practice of another group or is it something that we are really missing out on?

Have this speaker talk to your class about the value of solitude. Then encourage your students to talk openly about their questions, comments, and misgivings about what the speaker has said. (Explain to your speaker ahead of time that this will happen.)

Challenge your students to think through the issue of withdrawing from the world as contrasted with being a transforming presence in the world. What is the real purpose of solitude? What are the misuses of solitude that have made Christians today shy away from its practice? Show how John the Baptist, Jesus, and Paul all found strength in solitude, but alternated times of solitude with times of ministry.

**Summary Options**

Select one or more of these activities to summarize and give opportunity for students to apply the truth learned through this lesson.

1. Soloing

If you happen to be in a teaching situation where there are places to get away from one another, it seems fitting to end today's lesson by encouraging a time of solitude. Ask your students to get away alone and write down the following:

1. One confusing issue I am dealing with is . . .
2. Times of solitude could help me with this issue because . . .
3. A definite time that I can set aside for solitude is . . .
4. I can hear God's voice this week more clearly if I practice the discipline of silence by . . .
5. I will plan a longer time of solitude for prayer and goal-setting on . . . (date).

Perhaps your students don't need this much direction. You decide. The important thing is to let them put what they have learned into practice right away.

2. Brainstorming

Have your students brainstorm ways to find solitude in their busy lives. Begin by thinking of little times of solitude throughout the day. Then have them share other places for “getting away from it all." List their ideas and have them each choose one that they will try this week.

You may wish to have the name of a nearby prayer retreat center to recommend to the class.

3. Pairs Share

Distribute a copy of Duplication/Transparency Master No. 3 to each student. On this handout are several continuums that will help summarize today's session. Encourage each member of your group to place a mark on each continuum that reflects his or her feelings at the conclusion of this session. There are no “right” answers for this activity. It is more important that each student deal authentically with his or her thoughts, attitudes, and behavior.

Now have each student pair up with one other student and share his or her responses. This kind of sharing will help give concreteness to their thoughts as well as provide an arena of accountability if so desired by the pair. Have each pair close in prayer.

Use INTERSECT: Young Adult Discussion Starters to continue discussion on this lesson in a weekday Bible study session, as a take-home resource for further thought after today's lesson, or to supplement your in-session teaching of this lesson.

**Selected Bibliography**


SOLITUDE SURVEY

Spending time with just myself, with no outside distractions, media, or people, is . . .

Boring
Scary
Refreshing
Mandatory
Hard
Fun
A waste of time
Frustrating
Disconcerting
Something I do every day
Pointless
Insightful
Important
Restful
Appealing
Not practical
Nice but not necessary
Powerful
Not a concern for me
Unpredictable
Depressing
Inspiring
Sleep inducing
Emotional
Enjoyable
Tedious
Seldom a part of my busy schedule
Rewarding

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“We go more constantly and desperately to the post office, but the poor fellow who walks away with the greatest number of letters, proud of his extensive correspondence, has not heard from himself this long while.”

— Henry David Thoreau

● How important is it to hear from ourselves?

● What things, besides correspondence, keep people from hearing from themselves these days?

● Is it difficult or fairly easy to find time to yourself? Why?
My feelings toward the subject of solitude have ____________ through today's lesson.

____________________________________________________________
changed dramatically not changed at all

Times of solitude and silence seem to play a ______________ role in the life of a Christian.

____________________________________________________________
major minor

I feel that times of solitude in my life now are . . .

____________________________________________________________
a necessity not a priority

During the next week I am __________________________ to initiate or continue an organized plan of solitude in my life.

____________________________________________________________
very likely very unlikely

For me the _______________________ of (to) solitude are most obvious.

____________________________________________________________
positive results hindrances